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EL GALAN, THE BUCKAROO

by MARIAN O'HEARN

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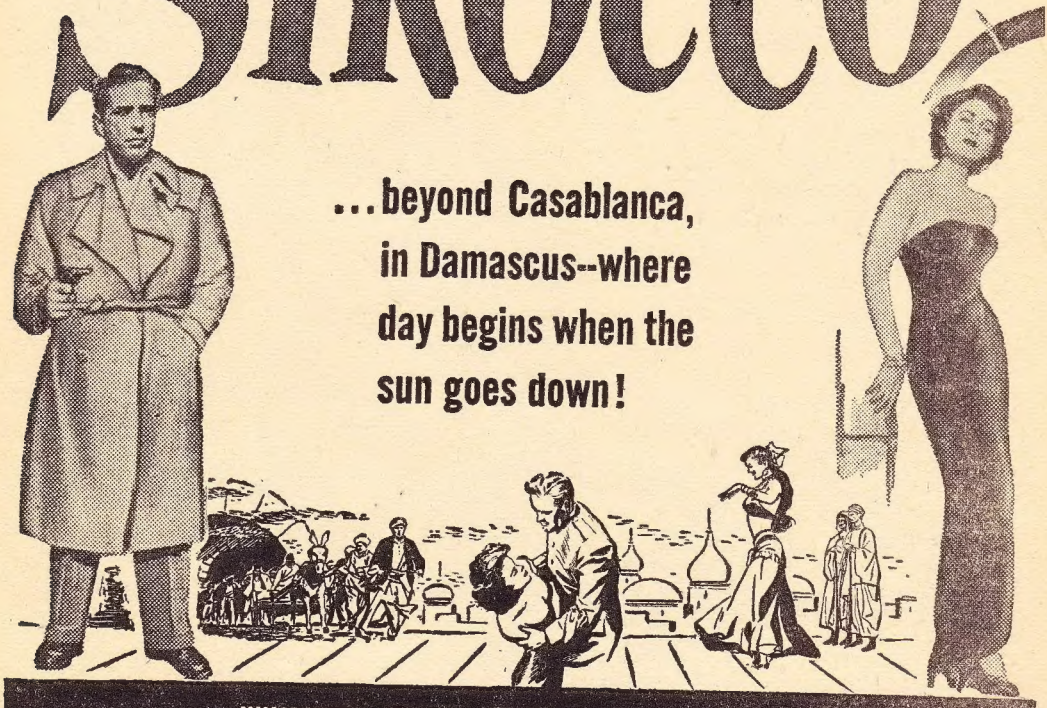

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LOQUACIOUSLY IN LOVE

By GLADYS MARTIN

Never write me
Aching flame,
Storm a sweetness
With my name,

Heave a sigh
And cut a caper
On a sheet
Of writing paper,

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CUSTOM-MADE KISS

Pert and pretty Katie McAllister was the daughter of Calico Gulch's sheriff—its recently ambushed sheriff. The lawmaker badge had been in Katie's family for two generations, and the people of the county just naturally figured it was up to Katie to appoint her father's successor, Katie had herself a pair of choices—her sweetheart or a wandering, and mighty fresh, drifter. Katie didn't want her sweetheart to come to the same end her father had met, so she pointed the finger at Bret Folsom, the drifter. . . .

KATIE stood there on the street a moment or two, undecided over what to do next. She supposed she might as well go back to the ranch, now that her brief fling at local prominence was over. But first she reckoned she ought to stop in at her father's old office.

When she got there, she opened the door marked SHERIFF and walked straight in. All the shades were drawn, and the room was shadowy.

"A sheriff just don't have no privacy no more," said a disembodied voice from the gloom.

Katie all but leaped to the ceiling. She shrank back, and then her eyes grew accustomed to the half-darkness, and she could make out Bret Folsom sitting at the desk where McAllisters had always sat.

"Oh . . . you're here already," she mumbled.

He grinned. "Thanks for the job, Katie. I couldn't have gotten me a softer bunk if I had picked it out myself. It was real nice of you to be so obligin'."

Katie came on over to the desk and looked despairingly at him. It was one thing to put Bret Folsom in the job because she wanted to teach him a lesson and because he didn't matter to her, but it was another not to give him fair warning.

"It wasn't obliging of me in the least," she said truthfully. "You've got your work cut out for you. Calico Gulch is a plumb cultus town. It's bad and it's dangerous and it's full of hard men—"

"Leastwise," he broke in, "I hope the women are soft."

Katie clenched her fists in impotent anger. How dare this—this galoot make light of the situation!

"Don't say I didn't warn you, Texas," she said quietly.

She turned around and would have gone straight out of the room again, if Folsom hadn't jumped up and headed her off.

"Katie," he said, and his voice held a curiously gentle timbre, "I think I know why you're warnin' me. But I want you to know that I don't need any warnin'. No matter what you may hear about my doin's from now on, remember that I aim to be a good sheriff—like your pa."

Katie couldn't think of anything to say to that. So she just stood there staring up at him, unable to tear her gaze away from the steadfastness of his.

Folsom took advantage of her momentary confusion to move still closer to her.

"You know," he said softly, "down in San Antone every new sheriff starts his first day in office by kissin' a pretty gal. For good luck, I guess. Anyhow I'm sure glad you happened to drop by when you did, Katie. I was gettin' mighty worried."

Katie began, "I—" and got no further. The next moment the long arms of the law were quite effectively around her, and she was being held prisoner by a kiss. . . .

San Antone and Calico Gulch weren't so far apart after all, Katie found out to her surprise, in Diane Austin's new novelette, "Beware a Law-Dog's Lady," in the next issue, out September 26th.

THE EDITOR.

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EL GALAN,

"It was to be just you and me," she said. "I won't share your time with another girl."

CHAPTER ONE

Ten-Gallon Gallant

ELINA was determined to remain calm as she toiled over the neglected saddle. Grimly, she rubbed and polished until the leather took on a bright, high gloss. And finishing, she picked up a can of saddle soap and threw it at the barn wall. It made a loud, satisfying crash.

This was part of her brother Tony's work. But Tony was no longer interested in work. In the last few weeks he had turned into a lazy, swaggering, impossible young stranger—an absurd and slavish imitation of his new friend and idol, Pat—*El Galan*—Kearney.

Kearney's arrogance must be overwhelming, she thought. According to range gossip,

THE BUCKAROO

Stirring Cow-Country Romance

By Marian O'Hearn

He came, he kissed, he conquered—that swashbuckling Casanova of the range—until he met a luscious lady who didn't know the meaning of surrender.

he never missed a chance for a new conquest and not only knew every girl in the border country but seemed able to charm most of them. A friendship between him and her brother could only be based on a boy's hero worship and a man's love of adulation.

Well, *El Galan* was about to lose his admirer, for from now on Tony was going to do his share of work. She would make that very clear—immediately—even if it meant riding to the foothills range to find him!

She turned so swiftly that her loosened hair spilled across her forehead. She thrust it back impatiently, and her soiled hands left streaks of grease on her cheeks. Her thin blue shirt was open at the throat, and her faded jeans were rolled up above her slim, bare knees. If only Kearney hadn't returned to Walking Tree County—

She halted in midstride. The light from the open barn door had been blotted out, and young Sheriff Rog Tennison was standing on the threshold. "Hello, Elina. Your mother said you were down here."

She stared at him for a startled second, and then color stung into her cheeks. Tennison looked so well-scrubbed and carefully groomed. Aware of her own bedraggled appearance, she wished she could disappear into space. To make matters worse, he was grinning.

"Well, Rog!" she said sweetly. "Thanks for letting me know you were coming, so I could get all fixed up."

The grin widened maddeningly. "Business brought me out to the range," he said, "but I couldn't pass up the chance of seeing you."

"Well, you're certaining seeing me," she snapped and stepped past him, out into the sunlight.

"You are messed you," he agreed cheerfully, solid shoulders tipped against the barn doors. "But still beautiful."

She tilted her chin and looked up at him, and the warmth in his eyes exploded into sparks of light. Not even the rolled-up jeans and dishevelment could conceal her vividness or spoil her grace. Her body was slim and lightly poised. Although her skin was fair, her long eyes were ebony brown and her hair was a thick and polished black, her mouth red as a cactus dahlia.

Her silence continued, and Tennison's grin disappeared. "If you're that mad, I'd better come back some other time. Sorry I upset you."

Elina's anger died and swift contrition filled her eyes. "I'm the one to be sorry. I didn't mean to be rude, but I've been prodded into it by—" She checked herself and went on quickly, "What's happening on Walking Tree range that would call out our lawman?"

"Nothing new. I've just been figuring that the 'Phantom Outlaw' robberies in String City may—"

"The robberies in String City!" Elina laughed. "But everybody knows it's the ghost of an old time badman who's come back to take care of some jobs he couldn't get around to while he was alive."

The sheriff's weathered jaws flushed. "Yeah," he murmured. "People are having fun. The thieves are slick and clever—they'd have to be to remove money and get away, leaving doors and windows locked, nothing disturbed, no clues. The only answer is that someone is supplying them with keys—but they can be caught. And they will be."

"How?"

"I figure the trail will be picked up on Walking Tree. I've been doing some checking and discovered that every time there's a robbery in String City, there's also a disturbance on Walking Tree range—which gets me out of town. When I locate the hombre they've planted out here to distract me, I'll have 'em all."

"Good," said Elina. "I'm going to get cleaned up now. Will you stay for dinner?"

"I can't. But what about tonight? This Double K shindig's going to be special."

Elina's mouth became straight and still. "No thanks. I don't even know the owner of the Double K."

"Who cares?" The sheriff shrugged. "Everyone in the county's invited to celebrate Pat Kearney's homecoming. After all, he was away for almost a year."

"It should have been ten. I'm still not interested in meeting *El Galan*."

Rog Tennison looked at her curiously. "Don't pay too much attention to range gossip," he said. "It was the Mexicans who tagged him *'El Galan'*, but it doesn't mean—"

"I know what it means and so do you—a special title for Walking Tree's great lover and the rich owner of the big Double K."

Tennison's solid shoulders moved in a gesture of indifference. "I'm not one of Kearney's admirers, but everybody's going, and it'll be a good party."

Elina shook her head. "Not everybody. *I* won't be there."

"In that case, I'll skip it, too. How about spending the evening in String City? Or going for a drive?"

She hesitated, and her glance strayed toward the barn. "I'm sorry. There's something that has to be taken care of tonight. Something important."

"Elina...." Rog Tennison's voice lowered. "I wish I could believe you really are sorry. But you're not really interested in me, are you?"

Something like shock flickered through her. Rog's face was suddenly gaunt and there was pain in his eyes. "I didn't mean—" This was like seeing a granite rock crumble or watching an experienced soldier waver. He had always been one of the sure, steady things in her world. He had to stay that way.

"If I weren't interested in you, we wouldn't have become such good friends," she said finally.

"Yet you sounded as if you wouldn't mind not seeing me at all."

"You're wrong. It's just that this is the last day—" She stopped, groped for covering words, and finally told him the truth: "I have to get Tony straightened out—and right away. He seems to have gone loco and needs to hear a few plain, hard facts."

"You're not letting me down easy?" He moved closer to her, his gray eyes searching her face.

"You know I'm not. I count on you, Rog, and have ever since I came to Walking Tree."

"Thanks," he said softly and held out his hand. "I hope you'll always count on me."

But as his hard-fleshed fingers touched her hand, they closed into a sudden, tight grip. "Seeing you even for a few minutes is more important than anything else in life. You don't know, you can't know...."

And before his words ended, she was in his arms, held close to his solid, muscular body. His kiss was swift, and his lips felt hard-edged with demand. But the hardness melted into young gentleness, and the pressure of his arms lightened.

Elina freed herself and stepped back, realizing that her breathing was too swift and her hands unsteady. "You—" Her voice shook with the effort to become matter of fact. "You're almost as dirty as I am now. There's grease all over your face."

White flame dropped out of his eyes. "You want to forget I kissed you. Don't worry, I won't try to make you remember. So long, for awhile." And he strode across the yard to the hitchrack and his waiting pony.

HER horse topped the edge of Coyote Mesa, and, pulling in, Elina looked down at the range below. The cattle were spread out over the length of the narrow valley and had obviously been drifting for hours. Tony was not in sight, and she knew that he hadn't been near the foothill pasture since he'd left the ranch house to relieve Jim Bates, the Split T's only hired hand. This would never happen again. Not

even if she had to drag Tony back herself.

She straightened. That sounded like a bawling cow. Bawling cows meant trouble. Wheeling her mount, she rode across the tiny mesa and once more pulled in to search the lowland. And finally she saw that a calf was caught in a narrow crevice. It had slipped into the rocky trap from the hill above and was bellowing with terror while its mother set up a desperate, mournful racket.

The girl sent her pony downslope, cantered across the narrow valley and, pulling in, dismounted to consider the calf's predicament. The animal was unharmed, but its frightened struggles were wedging it deeper into the rocks. A cracking lariat or gunfire from the hill above might shock it into leaping free, but there was also the chance that it would move in the wrong direction.

Finally, she untied her lariat and spun the first loop. She narrowed it swiftly and let it drop. It settled over the calf's head and forequarters, and she looped her end tightly around the pommel, slapping the pony's rump to start him moving away. The rope tightened and sang with strain.

Then the calf slid free of the imprisoning rocks. Elina got down, freed the animal and re-coiled her rope. And, as she stepped back into the saddle, hoofs slapped suddenly from behind her. She wheeled. The man riding toward her was a stranger who must have waited—in hiding—to watch her free the calf.

"Hello." He reined in and took off a faded, bent-brimmed Stetson. "Neat job you did on that calf. Too bad . . . ."

"You saw the whole thing and never even—"

She checked herself immediately. Strangers seldom appeared on Walking Tree Range, and this man's eyes were hard and arrogant, green eyes which flickered with odd yellowish light. His hair was red.

He leaned forward in the saddle. "This will need some talking over," he said finally, and his green glance wandered from her hair to her lips. "I'd sure hate to call in the law," he added and stepped from the saddle.

He was tall, big-boned and loosely knit. His clothes were worn and faded, his boots scarred, his dark neckerchief dusty. But the holstered gun at his thigh looked clean and new.

"This is just as tough for me as for you—catching a girl rustler right in the act. Wish I hadn't seen it."

"Are you trying to be funny?" Elina demanded. "You can't really think I was stealing cattle!"

"I watched you starting to haze that cow and calf right out of the valley, driving 'em fast, too."

Elina was really angry now. "Of course you did. The cow and its calf belong to me—or to the Split T. Now, if you've been humorous long enough, I'll be on my way."

"No, you won't." He stepped forward and caught her pony's cheek-strap. "That cow happens to be wearing a Double K brand."

Elina started to speak, but stopped herself.

"This is easy to settle," he said, and stepping back onto his horse, cantered across the pasture. His rope spiraled into the air, dropped and the cow fell. He dismounted again.

When Elina reached him, he was kneeling beside the bellowing animal and pointing to the mark on its hip. It was a clear, unmistakable Double K.

She stared at it while fire gathered in her throat and blazed up into her cheeks. "I—I—can't believe it."

"No? There's the proof right in front of you. Now what have you to say?"

Abruptly anger exploded in her brain. "What of it? There's no reason for me to say anything. Look, I heard the calf bawling and pulled it out of the crevice. I didn't even notice the cow's brand. If you're one of the Double K outfit, take it up with the proper authorities. Notify the sheriff!

Charge me with cattle-stealing! And see how silly you'll look. Now, get out of my way. You've already wasted too much of my time."

"Tch, tch." He was on his feet suddenly and standing between her and her pony. "You're much too pretty to get mad. Know what tantrums do to pretty faces? Rake 'em and dig 'em to pieces and—"

Elina looked into the green eyes with their strange, far glow. The glow was laughter, and his blunt-cornered mouth was shaping into a grin. So this was his idea of hilarious fun!

"You'll do almost anything for a laugh, won't you?" she said, her anger suddenly gone.

"I'm sorry," he said. The grin was fading. "You see, it wasn't just for a laugh." There was a new, young sincerity in his eyes. Maybe he wasn't at all what she had thought.

"No?" she asked. "Then what was the reason?"

"Promise you won't get mad again and rush off?"

She hesitated. "I'm listening," she told him.

"I'd heard the calf, too, and was riding around the hill to do something about it when I saw you burning leather toward the crevice. After that, I stayed where I was and did some fast figuring."

"So you accused me of rustling!"

"That was desperation. I couldn't let you get away before I found out who you were." His grin was back, and the far glow in his eyes became exploding sparks of excitement. His mouth had been made for laughter.

"I've lived here for almost a year," she said quickly, "and thought I'd met everyone in Walking Tree county, but I'm almost sure this is the first time I've seen you."

"It is. If we'd met before, you would have *known* it. I'd have seen to that." He pulled on the bent-brimmed Stetson and peaked it down over one dark red brow. "You said your brand was the Split T, so your last name must be Chadwick."

"How do you know?"

"Cowboys always give a new buckaroo a complete history of the range, ma'am."

"Then you've just joined the Double K outfit?"

He hesitated, and his green eyes sharpened. "Yes, I've only been there a few weeks. But I can't just call you 'Chadwick.' It doesn't fit."

She gave in and laughed, unable to remain stern before his infectious grin. "The first name is Elina."

"Nice. Thanks for that, too. Now we can get someplace. Are you going to the party at the Double K? And who's taking you? If you'd like to make a last-minute switch, I'll show up any time you say."

The new, exciting warmth left her. "No," she said her voice thin. "I'm not going. *El Galan* is one person I not only do not know, but hope never to meet."

"*El Galan*, eh?" His eyes were still.

"Yes. It means—"

"I know what it means," he said quickly. "Let's forget Pat Kearney. If you won't go to the party, maybe we could get together tomorrow night?"

"No thanks." The sense of intense aliveness was gone. She had only imagined this exciting difference in herself. She still hadn't found Tony. "I'll be much too busy." She became conscious of the heat and her own sudden thirst. "I didn't take a canteen, and I see you're not carrying one, either."

"We don't need one. I'll show you—"

But Elina was wheeling her pony away from him. "Good-bye, Mr. —"

"Some people call me 'Red.' "

CHAPTER TWO

A Dip in the Pool

SHE waved and headed north toward the gate-like entrance of a narrow pass. Beyond the opening was a bowl-like little valley hidden by rocks. A swift

ribbon of water, spilling from the hills above, formed a pool there lined by smooth, flat-topped boulders. Months before, Elina had discovered the tiny valley and the shallow pool, and she had come to think of them as a special, secret place of her own.

Emerging from the pass, she sent her pony across the coarse grass to the boulders lining the pool. Dismounting, she trailed the pony's reins and stepped up onto one of the big, flat-topped rocks—and saw Red, the stranger whom she had just left, sprawled comfortably on another of the boulders.

"Well, for—Hello!" He shot to his feet. "I didn't even hope I'd meet you again—at least, so soon."

"Didn't you?" She considered turning back to her pony.

"No. But if Fate's pushing us together, I won't fight it." His grin was flashing quicksilver, and his eyes green gems flecked with gold. The gold flared with the exciting mystery of heat lightning. She became conscious of the air against her face, of her breath filling her throat, of being completely alive.

"Does it seem that way?" she said.

"Yes, it does. And nobody can change what has to be, so we might as well give in."

She made herself turn away. Moving to the edge of the pool, she knelt and drank thirstily from her cupped hands. "I thought I was the only one who knew about this place," she said.

"Maybe you are. I was just riding around looking for water, and that Fate I mentioned kept pushing me in this direction. It pushed so hard I got tired and stopped beside the pool to rest."

Elina sank back onto the boulder and watched the whirling water. "It would be wonderful to go wading," she said wistfully.

He beamed at her. "The idea appeals to me, too." Hauling off his boots and socks, he stepped into the shallow water.

In less than a minute the girl's boots were also discarded, and she slid a bare foot gingerly through the snow-cold surface. "It's—marvel—ooh!—ous—" she cried, gasping, as she began to wade toward the other side. "Like a—"

And she dropped like a stone into seemingly bottomless depths. The water closed over her head with a roar, and she was caught in swirling blue-green space.

Hands gripped her shoulders, pulled her up and out of the water. The same hands lifted her into a pair of hard muscled arms. Red carried her back to the flat-topped boulder and placed her on it, face-down.

"No!" The cry cut through her strangled coughing, as she felt the pressure of his palms on her back. "I'm not—not that bad! Just let me alone."

"All right," he said. "But you don't sound very grateful. This is the first time I ever saved anyone from drowning. You ought to let me go through the whole procedure so the story'll sound good when I tell it."

Elina rolled over and sat up. "*Story* is just what it'll be. A baby couldn't drown in that pool."

"Maybe not, but you sure tried. Got pretty wet, too." His green glance sparked into laughter as it touched her eyes. "You might *not* have climbed out of that hole without my help, you know. That puts you under an obligation, of a sort."

"Of what sort?"

"Well, oughtn't you to change your mind and go to the Double K party with me? You can't prove I didn't save your life."

But the swift, answering gaiety he had ignited died. "I told you I don't know *El Galan* Kearney. I don't want to know him. And I won't accept hospitality from a man I despise."

"His name's Pat, ma'am. How can you despise someone you've never met?"

"I find it very easy," said Elina loftily, "considering his reputation as a swashbuckling Romeo and—and—"

"—Ladies man, professional heart-breaker, cheap Lothario?" he supplied cheerfully.

"He must be a regular four-eared rat."

"*Must* be?" She looked up at him. "Don't you know? You work for him."

"Sure, but he's just the boss," he said vaguely. He bent over her and stared intently, studiously, into her eyes. "Hmmm. Not what's usually called 'brown.' A nicer, deeper color....."

His breath was an alien pulse beating against the flesh of her lips. He kissed her, and the alien pulse became throbbing recklessness, lit flames of excitement in her blood.

"Elina." The word whispered from a great distance. "Elina, lovely...." The whisper had grown stronger. It was Red's deep, dark voice. The singing, throbbing world—a place which could last only for a single moment—was already part of the past. Her lashes lifted slowly. She was still in his arms, and the kiss had ended. He was saying softly, "It was Fate—our Fate—after all, even if I did help it along some."

Her mouth curved, and, as her dark head stirred against his shoulder, her lashes drooped again. She murmured, "You knew about this pool and guessed I'd come here."

"That doesn't change anything. It had to happen to us, Elina."

She sat up and searched his eyes. "Maybe—yes, I think it was," she said, her tone softening until it was beyond tenderness. "Yet an hour ago we'd never seen or heard of each other. Still it happened."

"Nothing could have kept it from happening," he told her, and his lips brushed across her cheek to rest lightly on her mouth. "I'll be at the Split T tonight. Your parents might as well be getting used to me."

"Mother's my only parent," she said. "But I have a sixteen-year-old brother—"

She stopped. She had forgotten Tony, the neglected stock, the desperate need for keeping the ranch going. She'd stopped thinking of everything except the red-haired stranger holding her in his arms. "I'll have to leave. I should have been home an hour ago."

He lifted her to her feet. "I'll see you about nine."

They walked slowly to her waiting pony, and he caught her back into his arms, held her almost fiercely, before putting her into the saddle. "*Adios, Elina, Mia.*"

"Adios—why, I still don't know your name!"

His green glance flicked over her face. "I like thinking my name doesn't matter. I wish—Elina, let me be just 'Red' until tonight, won't you?"

"If that's what you want. *Adios* then, Red."

THE sun was setting when Elina reached the Split T, and, as she entered the house, her mother hurried from the kitchen to meet her. "Thank goodness, you're here at last." Alice Chadwick was a plump, pink-cheeked woman with large blue eyes and an air of helpless anxiety. "I've been worried—why, what happened? Your clothes are wet!"

"I went wading and slipped. Is Tony at home, Mother?"

"Yes, dear, in his room. But—" Elina started down the hall "—you'd better not bother him now. He's getting dressed for the Double K party."

Elina halted. "He's going to Pat Kearney's party?"

"Indeed he is! Isn't it nice they've become such good friends? Mr. Kearney probably realizes what a bright, capable boy Tony is. A man like that could do a lot for him—"

"Mother," the girl's voice was thin and desperately quiet, "I must have a talk with Tony right now. He can finish dressing afterward. And, please, I want to be alone while we talk."

Elina walked down the hall and knocked on her brother's door. "Yes?" he called. "What is it?"

"I'm coming in," she said grimly.

"No, you're not. I'm busy."

She turned the knob and stepped into the bedroom. Tony swung around angrily to face her. "What's the idea?" He was tall and black-haired with eyes as brightly blue as his mother's, his cheeks still amost childishly round.

"You didn't go to the foothill range today," she began and broke of, gaping. Her brother was wearing a blue silk shirt, dazzling scarlet neckerchief, new dark trousers and equally new and expensive-looking boots. "Where did you get those clothes?" she demanded.

"That's my business."

"Answer me! Where did you get the money to pay for those clothes?"

His almost chubby cheeks flushed. "Now, listen, I've had enough of your bossing—"

"Elina, please!" Mrs. Chadwick darted into the room. "You shouldn't quarrel with him. Tony's at the age where he needs nice things."

The girl, feeling suddenly weary, turned to the older woman. "You gave him the money."

"Well, I—" The blue eyes misted with helpless tears. "A boy has to live a boy's life and—"

"But where did *you* get the money? Every dollar we have we need for absolute necessities."

The mist in Mrs. Chadwick's eyes swelled into great round tears which rolled down her cheeks. But she did not speak.

"Mother, I *must* know. I've been trying to keep the ranch going and squeeze out a living for the family. Where did the money come from?"

The woman's hands locked together and twisted. "I—I found it in the locked drawer of your desk. You'd left a bunch of keys in your room and I—well, I tried them. The money was *mine,* really, more than yours. This was your father's ranch and I'm his widow."

The girl stared at her. "That money was for food for us and winter grain for the stock. And Jim Bates' salary! His *wages*—"

Alice Chadwick pressed a handkerchief against her face and sobbed softly. "You don't understand. Only a mother knows about a young boy's needs."

"Maybe." Elina's voice was suddenly thin and cruel. "Still, doesn't a mother know about a girl's needs, too? I'm less than four years older than Tony. I haven't had a new dress in over a year. Because he won't do his part, I have to work harder than most men—"

Her brother stamped forward and stepped in front of the older woman. "You can't talk to mother that way!" he shouted. "I won't let you go on insulting her!"

Elina looked from the woman's soft, tear-stained face to the arrogant one of the boy's. *Arrogance.* More of *El Galan's* influence. The sense of weariness was a weight pressing against her. Her slim shoulders sagged, and she moved silently out of the room. But in the hall she paused and said, "I didn't intend any insult, Mother. Sorry if I—upset you."

DRESSED in a fresh cotton shirt, and a pair of well-worn levis, Elina sat on the top step of the veranda. A thin, weak moon filtered through the early darkness, but she was aware of neither night nor moon. How and where could she raise enough money to carry the spread through until spring? She would have to talk to the manager of the String City bank about a loan.

A pony left the corral and clopped across the yard. Jim Bates was starting for the foothills range. Wheeling abruptly, he pulled in near the steps. "Looks as if you're not going to the big shindig at the Double K," he said.

"No," she said briefly. "But I'll be up to relieve you in the morning."

"*You?*" he said and added, "Guess you'll have to, considering it's the day after the party. Tony won't be in shape to work.

For that matter, he seldom is, anyhow."

"Expect me at six," she said. "Good night, Jim."

"Good night." The middle-aged cowboy, who still seemed a stranger although he had been with the Split T for many months, rode toward the gates. And Elina continued to stare into the darkness which the moon touched with only the faintest mist.

A long time later, she realized the moon had brightened and became aware of the drum of fast hoofs which had aroused her. Someone was coming down the wagon road at top speed. Nearing the ranch, the hoofbeats slowed abruptly, a pony cantered through the gates and headed toward the house.

The brightening light splashed over him, and she started to her feet. *Red!* She had forgotten him. No, she'd only forgotten he was coming tonight, for the thought of him had never left her. He was warm, exulting excitement deep within her mind and senses.

She might be able to slip inside, dash to her room and change her clothes, but he had already seen her. "Elina," he called and, pulling in at the hitchrack, stepped to the ground. "Elina," he repeated.

Her hands were cold as his closed over them, and her fingers tightened and clung to his. "I had something to—think out and lost track of time."

"What needed thinking out?" His breath touched her lips and became a pulsebeat driving against the flesh.

"I'd rather not tell you. It's one of those family things."

"But I want to know about anything that bothers you."

The pulse beating against her mouth, quickened and created a vast, almost painful echo as her heart lifted into new, wild strokes. She tilted her head and waited for his kiss, and, as he took her mouth, the pulse was throbbing fire.

When the kiss ended, his arms tightened, holding her against him. "Let's have it. What's worrying you?"

"We'll talk about it later—maybe. Not now, please."

He put his hand under her chin and, tilting her face, looked into her eyes. "Have you changed your mind about us?"

"No, I haven't!" She moved even farther into his arms. "I'll never change my mind. Not about you."

"Then why not—"

"Let's walk down range lane," she broke in. "I want to know all about you. All about everything you've ever known."

His arms loosened and dropped. He straightened, and his face thinned. Became older and harder. "Yes," he said. "I've a lot to tell you."

WHEN they entered the range lane, however, he did not speak. They walked slowly through the long, distorted shadows dropped by the smoke trees lining one side of the lane. "Red?" she said, at last. "I'm waiting."

He stopped abruptly. "Elina," he said. He led her out of the shadows and into the gauzy light. "I want to see your face. You've known me only a few hours, and maybe you won't be able to understand."

"Of course I will," she said. "Whatever the past, it can't make any difference, but I'd like to know it, anyhow, because that'll be knowing you."

His hands touched her arms, slid up to her shoulders and closed on them. "The past isn't worrying me." He bent, and his glance thrust against the surface of her eyes. "Didn't you wonder why I asked you to call me 'Red' instead of telling my name?"

"Ye-es. I thought it was that you wanted things unchanged between us, for a little while."

"There was another reason. A more serious one. I'm Pat Kearney."

Her eyes remained on his face, and her lips stirred apart. "Pat Kearney." Laugh-

ter surged through the words. "You're not serious and this isn't a time for—for jokes."

"I wish I were joking, but I'm not."

"Pat Kearney," she murmured again, still unbelievingly. *"El Galan!"*

His hands left her shoulders. "That's why I didn't want you to know my name this afternoon. *El Galan*—that label was tied on me while I was still a kid—"

The color dropped out of Elina's lips, and hard, white pallor spread over her face. Her eyes were molten blackness. "And I'm another conquest, another mean little triumph. *I*—and I let you do it! Made it so easy!"

"Stop!" He caught her wrists, his hands bruisingly hard. "Don't say that! Listen to me, give me a chance to make you understand."

"Let me go!" She twisted violently against his grip. "You've collected another female scalp, which ought to satisfy you for awhile. Now, get off this spread!"

He released her. "Sure, I'll leave." His face was as colorless as hers. "If that's how you want it."

"It is. Just the way I want it."

He turned, strode swiftly up the range lane and disappeared into the yard. And a huge, agonizing breath caught and wedged in her throat. This couldn't have happened. There had never been a man named Red who had held her in his arms and whose lips had raised a wild joy in her blood.

She moved back into the shadows, walking slowly and uncertainly. The shadows deepened and a man stepped from behind the trees to block her way. It was Rog Tennison!

"Rog," she said numbly. "I thought you'd be at the Double K party."

"I changed my mind. I'm glad I came—when I did."

She made herself speak evenly. "It wasn't that I didn't want you here—"

"I know. You were expecting Pat Kearney."

"Rog! You—"

His face was white with fury and Elina could feel the tenseness in him as he tried to control his anger. "I've been here long enough to see you in his arms," he said, teeth gritted. "No wonder they call him *El Galan*—he can make love to any girl, including you."

"Stop, Rog!"

"I'm leaving, Elina Chadwick, and I won't be coming back. *Adios.*" And he, too, went swiftly through the shadows and away from her.

CHAPTER THREE

Dance-Hall Rival

AS ELINA left the String City Bank, panic was pressing against the edges of her mind. The manager had spoken to her with a careful, impersonal courtesy which had reminded her that the Chadwicks were still strangers in the Walking Tree country. He would take the matter under consideration, he said, but there was no reason for another trip to the bank. He would advise her by mail.

On the sidewalk, she paused uncertainly. If he refused to make the loan . . . Her unseeing glance touched a man striding along the wooden walk and something about him caught her attention. "Rog." The word broke from her a second before the ugly memory stabbed through her mind, and scarlet spread across her cheeks.

Tennison's eyes cooled; he hesitated and stopped. "Hello, Elina. Looking for Tony?" His face was empty, his voice casual.

"Tony? I didn't know he was in town. Have you seen him?"

"Yes. You'll probably find him at the Sky High gambling house in the next block."

"Gambling house!"

"And dance hall. That's what seems to interest your brother. See you again." He went on, a man who was no longer a part

of her life and obviously didn't care.

She thrust Rog Tennison firmly from her thoughts. Was Tony really frequenting dance halls and honkatonks? She looked down the street, saw the sign "Sky High" and started toward it.

The windows of the "Sky High" were heavily curtained, and a thick, low roar of voices came from beyond the closed door. She stepped through the door and found herself staring into almost impenetrable gloom. Fuzzy light trickled through a shadowy space where couples moved slowly over a small dance floor.

She waited near the threshold for her eyes to accustom themselves to the dimness and finally saw that the floor was surrounded by small tables. And the tables were occupied by cowboys and girls in bright, short-skirted dresses. Along one side of the room was a bar, a few cowhands lined along it. To the mirror behind it was pasted a placard which read:

MET THE PHANTOM OUTLAW YET? FREE DRINKS IF YOU CAN PROVE IT.

Elina moved closer to the tables, straining to see through the gloom. Tony wasn't here. But . . . . Her breath caught and wedged in her throat. At a table only a few feet away was a man whose hair was gleamingly red. Pat Kearney. With him was a blonde girl with a round, pretty face, and Pat, his back toward Elina, was leaning forward, talking softly and earnestly. The girl's eyes were shimmering with starkly frank interest.

Abruptly, Kearney straightened, pushed back his chair and stood. The blonde girl also got to her feet and, putting a hand on his arm, went on talking. She was not like the other girls in the dance hall. Her dress was a simple, almost demure, dark blue with a long, ankle-covering skirt. There was no makeup on her face, no glittering jewels on her hands. She was smil-

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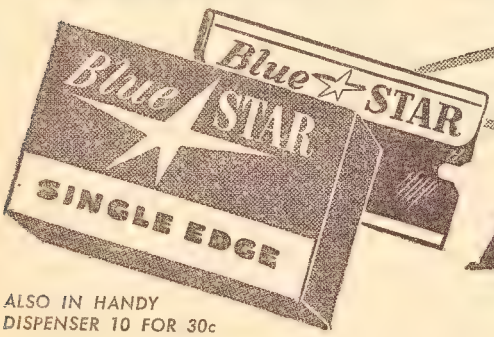

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ing as her lips shaped words covered by the blaring music. But the orchestra crashed to an unexpected end, and her thin soprano carried clearly through the room:

"That won't be hard to do," she told Pat Kearney. "You could make me forget the kid. I think you already have."

"It's a promise." He started for the door, paused, and looked directly at Elina, who was waiting, motionless, in the shadows she had hoped would conceal her.

"Hello." His face thinned into blankness. "This is a surprise." He was beside her, taking her arm. "I'll see you wherever you want to go."

"No," she said.

His hand closed into a metal-hard grip, and he forced her through the door and out to the sidewalk.

"What were you doing in the Sky High?" he demanded.

"Do you really expect me to explain? To you?"

"Maybe not. But girls just don't go to places like that."

"I saw quite a few in there."

"That's no answer and you know it." His face was still thin, his eyes unrevealing as green gems. "You're probably looking for Tony."

She did not answer, and he went on, "You're too easy with him. Give him his choice between—" He broke off, his glance flicking toward someone hurrying past them.

It was her brother, turning into the Sky High. "Tony," she called.

He spun around. "You—I didn't see you." His chubby cheeks flushed. "Hello, Pat, I've been looking for you."

"And I've been looking for you," the girl cut in. "I'm starting for the ranch right now, and you're going with me."

He scowled and then glanced knowingly at the other man. "Are all women alike?" He grinned and moved toward the gambling house door. Opening it with a flourish, he waved tauntingly and disappeared.

"A yearling trying to be a long-horn," Pat Kearney drawled. "I'll bring him back out."

"No, you won't! This is your fault. He considers you his pal, and he's so proud of it that he's trying to imitate everything you do. You've turned him into a worthless young monster, a baby *El Galan!*"

The green glance reached for her eyes, and stared harshly into their depths. "Do you believe that?" he said.

Elina smiled and walked briskly away from him.

LATE that night, Elina was dreaming she and Pat Kearney were standing beside the pool in the foothills, and that he was demanding, over and over, "Do you believe that?"

"Elina!" The shrill cry shattered her sleep. "Wake up!" Her mother was bending over her; she sat up in bed, still bewildered from her dream.

"Yes, yes," she muttered. "I'm awake. What's the matter?"

"Tony! He's leaving home. Packing his things—and because of you. You've made him so ashamed he can't stay here."

The girl slid her feet to the floor. "I made him ashamed—? But never mind. Where is he now?"

"In his room."

Elina started for her brother's room, but he was already in the front hall, knapsack in hand.

"Tony, wait."

"Let me alone." He turned on her savagely. "You've done enough. All I want is to get away from you and everything connected with this one-horse spread. I'll show you—"

"All right," she broke in, "but first tell me what you think I've done."

"Sure." He let the heavy bag fall to the floor. "I'll tell you plenty—"

"Please, please, dear!" Mrs. Chadwick pushed between them and caught the boy's arm. "Try to control yourself."

"Let me go." He freed himself and turned back to Elina. "You made a fool of me all right. You must've put on quite an act for Pat Kearney! Tonight he came into the Sky High and told me to get out! He called me 'Sonny' and said I ought to be home in bed! He shouted it out right in front of everybody. In front of—" He broke off, face twisted and lips shaking as if he were fighting tears.

"Tony," she said quietly, "I saw the Sky High dance hall. Whatever happened there—in front of the people who patronize it—doesn't matter. A place like that and the kind of girls who work in a dance hall—"

"You don't know what you're talking about!" he shouted. "And don't call them all *dance hall girls,* because they're not. Mona Holland's just as good as you are. Her uncle owns the Sky High. Besides, she's the real reason Pat Kearney made a clown out of me. You gave him just what he wanted—and he used it, figuring Mona wouldn't want anything more to do with me. Now good-by." He picked up the bag and jerked open the door.

"No, you can't! Tony, you mustn't—" Mrs. Chadwick screamed and ran after him; but Tony's horse had been saddled and waiting, and she got to the porch in time to see him ride away.

His mother sank down onto the steps, weeping hysterically. Elina, suddenly heavy with weariness, went out and helped her up. "Come in," she said softly. "He won't go any farther than String City."

Alice Chadwick pulled away from her. "You're responsible! If you hadn't hounded him so much this wouldn't have happened! Oh-h-h . . ." She broke into a keening wail.

"Please stop crying," Elina begged wearily." I'll go to town in the morning and find him. I'll bring him home."

But when she left for String City the next morning, her mother was still weeping. She must get Tony to return, and she would accept any conditions he might make. She pushed her mount to top speed and kept him there until she reached town.

Leaving the pony at a hitchrack near the bank, she walked slowly down the main street, hoping to see her brother, but certain that he would be in the Sky High. He would feel he had to return to show his defiance of Pat Kearney, who had been his idol. Would he become even more outraged if she followed him into the dance hall?

Her steps slowed, and she paused uncertainly before the entrance. A man's shadow dropped over her; it was Pat Kearney standing beside her. "I've been waiting for you," he said.

"Waiting for *me*?"

"I figured this would be the first place you'd look for Tony."

"Do you know where he is?" she demanded quickly.

"Yes," he said slowly, looking at her uncertainly, "but you'd better hear what I've got to say first." His lips no longer seemed shaped for the laughter of the moment.

"All right, I'll listen."

PEOPLE moved past them, a few eyeing Elina curiously. Perhaps they considered her *El Galan's* newest conquest. "Tony left home," Kearney went on, "to prove he's no longer a kid who takes orders from his sister."

"But he didn't leave until you'd ridiculed him in public, before a girl named Mona Holland."

He nodded. "I made a bad mistake. I figured I could make him wake up, but it worked the other way. Still, if you talk him into going back now, he'll be worse than ever. He'll start giving orders and, any time he doesn't get his own way, threaten to leave again. The setup will be hopeless."

"There's nothing else to be done."

"Yes, there is. Let him stay in town, on his own. He'll find a job—I'll see to that—

and discover what it means to be on his own. It may beat some sense into him—"

She was silent and, when he did not speak, asked, "That's all you have to say about Tony?"

"Just 'about."

"But String City may not be good for him. Mona Holland— And he's only sixteen—" She stopped, and fire ignited in her throat. Tony had also said that Pat Kearney wanted Mona for himself.

"That's been taken care of," Kearney told her. "Your brother's going to find out that he's not welcome at the Sky High."

He had taken care of it—and because of Mona, not Tony. Her lips stirred as they had when his breath had touched them. "You may be right. Thanks for trying to help—"

"Pat! Pat Kearney!" A girl—the blonde, pretty girl of the Sky High dance hall—moving so hurriedly that she seemed almost to whirl, charged up to them.

"Hello, Mona."

She put her hand on his arm and looked briefly at Elina with eyes which shimmered with anger. "What's the answer?" she demanded.

Kearney grinned. "To what? State the problem first if you expect an answer."

"Don't try to hedge with *me!*" Her voice rose to a shrill peak. "Nobody makes a fool of Mona Holland! You may be the great lover of Walking Tree County, but I won't take such stuff from you—or anybody else."

"Hold it!" Kearney snapped. His grin had gone, and its departure left his mouth edged with hardness. "What's this all about?"

Her eyes were pale. "As if you don't know! We'd made a bargain. The deal was that after I got rid of the kid, it was to be just you and me. I won't share your time with another girl, with—"

"That'll be all!" His words stabbed through hers.

She laughed. "Oh, no, it's not, *Mister* Kearney. There's plenty more—for you, too, Big Sister! I'll fix both of you." She spun away, as swiftly as she had come.

"Sorry again," Kearney's mouth was still edged. "I can't figure such a crazy scene."

Elina's lips stirred into a faint, twisted smile. "I can," she said and turning blindly, walked away.

Even a girl like Mona Holland wouldn't stage a public quarrel unless she had a genuine claim on Pat Kearney. *After I got rid of the kid.* She had meant Tony, of course. *It was to be just you and me.* Mona and Pat.

Elina paused and discovered that she was near the entrance of the Sky High. She couldn't go in now, even to find her brother.

She walked on and, turning the corner into the side street, saw a man emerge from the rear door of the dance hall. It was Jim Bates, the Split T hand. Her lips parted over his name, but she caught herself. Bates was on night herd, and what he did during his free time was not her concern. Still, it was odd that he had left the Sky High through the rear door . . . .

I'll go home, she decided. *Maybe even if Pat Kearney is—is what he is, he's right about Tony. Perhaps being on his own for awhile will straighten him out.*

CHAPTER FOUR

Call for Help

IT WAS after midnight when the rifle shots awakened Elina. Three quick reports, a pause, then a single shot followed by two more. Trouble—Jim Bates' special signal.

She slid out of bed, pulled on riding clothes and ran down the hall. Out on the porch, in the blackness, she stared around, searching. "Jim—Jim Bates!" she called.

A figure moved, and she could hear the stamp of a halted pony. "Here I am, ma'am." It was Jim's voice, and Elina could just make him out, sitting his horse in the shadows.

"What is it, Jim!" she whispered. "What's happened?"

"I've got bad news for you, Miss Chadwick. Tony's in trouble."

"Tony! Is he here?"

"No. The kid's been arrested. There was another robbery in town. Big one. Five thousand stolen from the Overland Stage Company. The sheriff says Tony's the *Phantom Outlaw.*

"The *Phantom*—Tony—" Her words cut off. Rog Tennison must have gone out of his mind. Accusing a boy like Tony of being the *'Phantom Outlaw'!* She'd tell Rog a few truths . . . .

Ten minutes later, she was riding furiously toward String City, and in town, she didn't check her pony's speed until she neared the small jail house and sheriff's office. Dropping from the saddle, she ran up the steps and jerked open the door of Tennison's office. Rog, seated at a desk facing the door, looked up.

"I've been expecting you," he said, pulling a chair closer to the desk. "Sit down."

"You've charged Tony with robbery."

"Sit down. I'll give you all the facts I have. Tony did some drinking around town tonight—"

"Drinking!" she cut in. "Who let—"

"Well," he said, "among other places, he was in the Sky High and looking for trouble. He was so noisy, Mona Holland talked him into going for a walk with her to get him out of her uncle's place. While they were walking, she talked him into going home. After he agreed, she left him.

"But later he was found asleep in an alley, and he was brought here. So I put him to bed, emptied his pockets and made a list of everything on him. I found three peculiar-looking keys in his pocket and put them in the safe with his cash.

"I'd forgotten about 'em, until the manager of the Overland Stage Company busted in yelling that his office had been robbed

oh-oh, Dry Scalp!
"BILL'S A GREAT DATE, but he's a square about his hair. He's got all the signs of Dry Scalp! Dull hair that a rake couldn't comb . . . and loose dandruff, too. He needs 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic!"
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NEAT SOLUTION, this 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic! Just a few drops a day check loose dandruff and other annoying signs of Dry Scalp . . . make your hair naturally good-looking. Contains no alcohol or other drying ingredients . . . it's economical, too.
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Listen to DR. CHRISTIAN, starring JEAN HERSHOLT, on CBS Wednesday nights.
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of five thousand dollars. The robbery had been handled like all the *'Phantom's'* jobs. On a hunch, I tried Tony's keys on the office door. One of them worked."

"The key fitted the lock on the door? But how could he open the safe?"

Tennison shook his head grimly. "The money wasn't in the safe. It was in a desk drawer. The manager thought it was smarter to keep it there because a thief would expect it to be in the safe. Tony must've found out about that."

Elina stared at the lawman. "It's not true," she said stubbornly. "Tony wouldn't —couldn't—"

Tennison shrugged and got to his feet. "I'll bring him out. You'll want to talk to him." He crossed the office and a moment later reappeared with Tony.

Tony looked white and ill, moving as if half asleep. "Elina," he muttered, "I didn't want them to bring you here."

She put her arm around him. "Sit down," she said gently, leading him to a chair. "Tell me what happened."

He stared at her dazedly. "I don't know. I can't remember. But I didn't rob the stage company. I didn't. I never saw those keys before. I wandered away from the Sky High with somebody—don't know who —and the next thing I knew, I woke up in a cell. Rog Tennison was shaking me and shouting."

The girl took his hand and held it tightly. He was telling the truth. She was sure of that. And somehow . . . .

"This is rough on you—and Mother," the boy went on. "But it'll be straightened out. Tell Mother that. Pat Kearney came to see me. He said he'd take care of me."

"I thought you and he had quarreled."

The boy shook his head impatiently. "Makes no difference. Besides, he only gave me what I had coming. I—I've been acting like a loco coyote. Especially to you—"

"Never mind," she said quickly.

"Listen, Sis, go home and stop worrying. Pat Kearney has given me his promise."

She left him finally, wondering if Kearney would really help. *Yes* . . . . she decided, *he will.*

BUT three days later, Tony was still in jail, and there had been no word from Pat Kearney. Elina was indifferent to everything else, even to the letter from String City's bank manager who wrote that he would be happy to arrange a loan for her. This meant that the Split T was safe, but to Elina nothing was good news until Tony should be cleared. She remained in the house, waiting. Mrs. Chadwick was in bed, ill with worry and grief.

The third day was the same as the two which had passed. Endless nightmare hours of slowly dying hope. Kearney's promise to Tony was worthless. He had done nothing, hadn't even come near her or Tony. Something had to be done and fast.

She would make *El Galan* keep his promise. It was his fault that Tony was in trouble. It was his responsibility, and he would have to accept it! Halting her endless, nervous pacing, she went to her room and got into riding clothes, and ten minutes later was on the wagon road which led north toward Kearney's Double K.

As she turned off onto a branch trail and rode over a tiny mesa at the edge of the foothills, she could glimpse the Split T range. It was empty, which meant the cattle had drifted through the valley. Where was Jim Bates? But she sent her pony downslope and prodded him into a faster gait. The Double K was still miles away.

Suddenly she jerked to a halt.

A rider had swung around the base of the distant ridge. He was bent forward, sitting awkwardly in the saddle. Another rider appeared behind him. He, too, sat his mount peculiarly. And a moment later, a third pony appeared. Something was wrong. All three were wooden-stiff and helpless. But the man on a following horse was erect and light in the saddle. He seemed to be

calling orders to those ahead—and then, Elina understood. The first three riders were tied to their ponies!

Uneasily, her glance ran over them again. The last horseman was tall, and even under the bent-brimmed Stetson the light caught the glint of red. Pat Kearney. The others . . . Her breath caught. One of them was small and slight with very blonde hair—a girl's.

She jumped her pony forward, raced toward the broken ridge of hills, and came face-to-face with the first bound rider. He was a gray-haired, thin-faced man whom she had never seen, but behind him was Jim Bates, who was sagging helplessly in the saddle. His arms were tied, and a long, red stain streaked his shirt.

"Hold it!" Pat Kearney's voice called. The gray-haired man stopped his mount awkwardly with his knees. Kearney rode forward and halted Bates' pony, while the third drew in beside him. And the third rider—also bound—was Mona Holland.

Pat Kearney walked his horse toward the girl. "I've been keeping my promise to Tony," he said gravely. "That hombre with the gray hair is Larry Holland. You already know Bates and the girl. Holland has been engineering the *Phantom* robberies with the help of his niece. It was easy for her to get information—and keys—from hombres who came to the Sky High and got foggy."

"They've been—when did you find out?"

"I began to get suspicious after Tony was arrested. I remembered Mona's promise to 'fix' not only me, but you. So I began to watch Holland. He didn't make a move until yesterday, when he lit out for the hills, taking his niece with him.

"I trailed them until they met your Jim Bates at Crossed Rock Peak. Bates put up a battle when I surprised them, but after he took a slug, he talked. He'd been working with Holland, stirring things up on the range when they wanted to take the sheriff's attention off String City for awhile."

"Why did they pin the holdups on Tony?"

"That was Mona's idea—her revenge against you. If she hadn't wanted to hurt you, they might not have been caught for a long time."

Elina drew a long breath. So sudden was her relief that tears stung into her eyes.

"I wish I could say something. I—you did this for Tony, in spite—"

"—in spite of being a worthless, conceited buckaroo called *El Galan*."

"You can't be—what I thought."

"Elina, look at me."

Her chin tilted, and she looked up into

his eyes—green eyes which had become flecked with bits of gold and warmth.

"Thanks," he said, and his mouth shaped into a grin. "I wasn't much older than Tony when someone pinned that *El Galan* handle on me. Sure, I smiled at pretty girls. I liked them and would ride miles just to look at them. But I was still such a kid I was too afraid to kiss them. After I grew up, I began to wait—for just one girl. A very special girl."

"I'm sorry."

"I wonder if you are. I think I'll find out." He stepped to the ground and lifted her from the saddle into his arms. His mouth took hers, and an alien pulse sprang to life within the flesh. It pounded fiercely until another pounding throb answered it. And Elina was exultantly alive. Pat Kearney was the only man who could ever share such a moment.

THE END

When you ask a handsome stranger for his good, strong gun-arm, Ann found—it's dangerous to be . . .

Not Quite Kissproof

By A. C. Abbott

"When a man tries to cuss me," he said, "I slug him. When a woman tries it, I—"

ANN DALEY, her dark hair held out of her way by a red ribbon at the back of her neck, was perched on a stool in front of a type case, working like sixty. Shadows were growing long and her dad still hadn't succeeded in locating old Sheriff Lemmon, but the *San Simon Journal* was going to roll off the press just the same.

She was setting the last paragraph of the all-important notice when a man's voice sounded directly behind her.

"How you doin', honey?"

Ann nearly fell off the stool as she whirled with a gasp, her right hand instinctively flashing over to cover the type she had been setting. Owen Beck leaned one elbow idly on the stone, his rock-gray eyes fastened on her with insolent speculation.

"What do you want?" she demanded, instantly fearful.

He shrugged his wide shoulders with feigned nonchalance. "I just stopped by to see how you were getting along."

"I'm getting along all right," Ann said, "and I'll get along better after you leave. Beat it!"

"No hurry," he returned easily. "You got until tomorrow afternoon to get this fly-bitten sheet out."

"That's not—"

Ann bit her tongue and then let her breath out carefully. They *would* have had until tomorrow afternoon if Owen Beck, arrogant young owner of Lazy B, had not been a complete range hog. As it was, the paper had to be off the press and well on its way to distribution by the time the sun came up next morning. If it came up.

Ann Daley was scared, and Owen Beck's dominating presence wasn't helping her one speck. She bit her lower lip feverishly as she saw his eyes slide over the forms that were already locked up, then settle on the one that was still open, waiting for this notice and the editorial her dad intended to print right beside it.

"This is the front page, ain't it?" he asked casually.

"Yes."

"What you going to fill it with?"

"News," Ann snapped. "If I get a chance to finish setting the items!"

"Ahuh." He looked back at her, and Ann felt the flesh crawl along the back of her neck. "You know, I'm going to want to see a proof of this thing before it's printed."

"Vamoose," Ann said and whirled back on her stool, trying futilely to remember where she had been in her mental copy when she was interrupted.

"I got a lot of time," Owen said, still with that tauntingly casual voice. "Where's the sheriff?"

Ann's startled gaze went blankly past the composing stick she held in her hand to the ink-smudged apron she wore over her neat gray dress. Her throat was as tight as a war drum. "I don't know. You need the sheriff for something?"

"No," Owen said, "but I hear your dad's lookin' for him."

"Dad?" Ann tried to laugh, but it was a sorry effort. "I think he's looking for a beer, but if he doesn't get back in here pretty soon, I'm going to be looking for him!"

She hadn't even finished speaking when Owen's hand clamped over her shoulder. Ann winced, twisting off her stool and straightening to face him, feeling a raging fury rise from the depths.

"Take your hands off me!" she said hotly.

"You know," he drawled, ignoring her order, "your dad's gettin' too old for this kind of business. He ought to quit."

"He'll have to quit," Ann snapped, "if he withholds publication of this government notice."

"He'll sure have to quit if he don't," Owen said darkly. "I want that Turkey Creek country, and I don't want to have to pay sixteen prices for it either."

"Sure," Ann said scathingly, her anger overriding her caution. "If nobody else knows about the sale, there won't be anybody bidding against you, will there? That's one way to steal land from the government!"

"You've got no call to get sanctimonious."

She could see his chest rising and fall-

ing angrily beneath his expensive tan shirt, and she drew back as far as his powerful grip would let her. It wasn't far enough.

"Your dad's got no kick either," he went on. "I'm givin' him a good chunk of that land for keepin' this notice of sale out of the paper. You know, darlin', it'll be pretty nice, with him settled and retired on his own property right next to ours."

"Ours!" Ann echoed, shocked.

"Sure. We'll get married just as soon as this deal goes through."

ANN stared at him in absolute incredulity for a moment. Then swiftly her glance ran over him, from the slick blond hair showing under his tilted black hat to his hand-stitched boots and back again, landing once more on his smugly composed face. Her loathing traveled right along with her eyes, and it took on size like a snowball rolling down hill.

She had known for a long time that something was biting Owen Beck, having squirmed more than once under the pressure of his stare. But marriage!

She burst out, "Why, I wouldn't marry you if—"

That was as far as she got before she was jerked against him, and his lips closed over hers with a possessive drive that knocked both fear and anger out of her. There was so much pressure behind that kiss that Ann had to return it to keep her neck from popping, but she certainly didn't do it willingly. Dimly she heard the composing stick clatter to the floor.

After what seemed hours, Owen lifted his head, his eyes gleaming like sunlight on granite. "See what I mean?" he asked cockily.

Ann shoved away from him, swiping at her mouth with the back of one hand while she fought down an abhorrence that threatened to strangle her. She just didn't have words enough to tell him what she thought of him, so she turned her impotent glare to the type scattered over the floor.

"I see what you've done," she gritted. "Look at that type!"

"Hell with the type," he retorted. "What about that kiss?"

Ann's head jerked up defiantly. "Well, what about it?"

He grabbed her again, his hands closing painfully over her arms; but Ann stood her ground, staring at him with an icy fury that made him finally step back.

"Those dark eyes of yours," he said deliberately, "are mighty pretty when you're mad, but you better simmer down, little lady. I usually get what I want, one way or another."

With that he turned and walked stolidly back through the shop. Ann sagged onto her stool like a wet dress when the clothes line is dragging. Her hands, she discovered, were shaking like castanets and she twisted them into her apron to make them stop.

But she couldn't twist her breathing apparatus into her apron, and it was completely off schedule. Owen Beck, she realized, strongly suspected that her dad was not going to submit to his high-handed order to withhold the notice of sale. What the consequences would be, Ann didn't dare consider; but her dad had told her that if they let Owen Beck have that government land at his own price, he would be just that much more powerful, just that much more capable of squashing the small ranchers who stood in the way of his empire. Probably just that much more capable of taking Ann Daley whether she wanted to be taken or not.

Abruptly Ann stood up and snatched the metal stick off the floor, shuddering at the thought of a lifetime of kisses like that one. Not that she was allergic to kisses exactly, but she had always been darned particular who handed them out. Turning to the case, she plopped on her stool and started over.

That stuff on the floor could be cleaned up tomorrow or next week—if the print shop were still in existence.

She had barely succeeded in getting back to work when she heard the tinkle of a spur, accompanied by the sound of a man clearing his throat. For a moment she sat rigid, relishing the surge of a blazing anger. Then she came off the stool like a whirling dervish, the composing stick clutched with all the menace of a left-handed monkey wrench.

"Get out of—!"

Ann's shout cut off as if someone had pulled the switch on her electric current. The man confronting her, one hand resting wearily on the stone, was a complete stranger—a long lanky proposition who had cowboy stamped all over him. She was aware of the business-like sag of his gunbelt, but it was his eyes that startled her. They were as blue as a sunlit sky on a frosty morning—and about as warm.

He flicked a brief glance at the type on the floor. "Have a wreck?" he asked.

"Yes, I had a wreck!"

"Well, you don't need to take it out on me. I want to put an ad in the paper."

"What kind of an ad?"

"About a horse that turned up missin'."

He stopped there, evidently expecting her to get a pencil and paper and write down his message, but Ann Daley was not in the mood for a sob story about horses, either individually or in herds.

"Too late," she said shortly. "You'll have to wait till next week."

"That'll be too late," he said in that same even voice. "Take it now."

"The paper for this week is all made up!"

Ann said it with all the finality at her command, but it had no effect on the cool inspection the stranger gave to the open form beside him.

"I don't know nothin' about the newspaper business," he said, "but I never saw a paper with that big a hole in one page."

"That space is taken."

"My ad won't take up much room."

Ann pulled in a deep breath and held it while she counted to ten. She couldn't explain to this stranger why she had neither the time nor the room to bother with his ad, and he obviously was not the type to back up without good reason.

"You'll have to see my dad," she said, again with finality. "I'm busy."

"Where is he?"

"I don't know."

"What the hell's the matter with this town?" he demanded. "I tried to find the sheriff but nobody knows where he is, either. I've got *you* located, Sis, and I want action. Now do somethin' about this ad."

HE HAD the drawling voice and broad accent that characterized the Southwest, but the famous sunshine was definitely missing. Besides, those frosty blue eyes, which had been making periodic excursions over Ann's trim figure without any indication whatsoever of approval, were having a drastic effect on her blood pressure.

"Listen, mister—" she began.

"You listen, Sis." He took such a long stride toward her that Ann tried to back up, tripped onto her stool and sat there, wide-eyed with apprehension. "I just finished walking ninety-three and six-tenths miles. I got two blistered heels, a fatal case of heat prostration and a thirst that'd dry up the Great Salt Lake."

"Also," she interrupted, "a disposition like a scorpion that just got his tail stepped on. I told you I was busy."

For a moment the man eyed her searchingly, then slowly lifted his hands to his hips, squaring off with a reckless challenge that Ann found breathlessly disturbing.

"You're gonna be busier," he murmured, "if you don't take my ad. I haven't turned a girl over my knee for a right smart while."

"Why, you—"

Ann's righteous indignation choked her as a fiery blush flew into her face. A slow grin stretched the man's lips, revealing teeth that sparkled beautifully white against his dark face.

Something about that grin upset her, scattering the last remnants of her composure like a lightning storm scatters cattle. Abruptly she whirled around on the stool, got a good grip on the stick if not herself and snapped, "Shoot."

"Lost, strayed or stolen," he drawled, hesitated, then added, "Probably stolen. Six-year-old gelding. Sorrel with blazed face and four white stockings."

Ann's fingers were flying and so was her mind. That "probably stolen" had a warlike sound.

"Where'd you lose him?"

"'Bout ten miles south of town. I made camp on a little creek and then started out to do some fishin'." He finished with a shrug.

"Horse probably just wandered off," Ann said meanly.

"Sure, he could have," the man admitted, "but I doubt like hell that he saddled himself. Killed his own tracks, too."

"Smart horse," Ann said. "Want to sign your name to this?"

"Yeah. Flip Jarrett."

Ann's fingers closed so tightly around the ad she had just set that she nearly spilled it. Flip Jarrett! That name rang bells in her memory and, unless her memory failed her, it fitted perfectly with his chill glance and reckless manner.

What had been a rebellious, instinctive interest on Ann's part suddenly flared into a full-blown awareness of the man standing beside her. She stole a sidelong glance at him, noting the unrelenting set of his brown jaw, the pleasingly firm line of his mouth. She was staring at his lips, wondering if his kiss would be as harshly revolting as Owen Beck's and doubting it strongly, when she became aware that he was looking a hole clear through her.

"Is th-that all?" she stammered.

"Yeah. If anybody comes in about that, I'll be at the hotel. How much do I owe you?"

Ann evidently told him because he paid her, but her thoughts were enveloping something a great deal more important than the price of a classified ad.

Jarrett started out but paused to ask matter-of-factly, "Who was that gent went out of here just 'fore I came in?"

"Owen Beck, owner of the Lazy B."

He eyed her for a moment with quiet thoughtfulness before nodding briefly, "Thanks, Sis."

Then he was on his way—and so was Ann. The front door had barely closed behind Flip Jarrett before she was digging feverishly through the old files, scanning each issue with almost frantic haste until she found the one she wanted. Then she sank onto a chair, reading the one pertinent article through hurriedly, then going back to peruse it more carefully a second time. And her imagination was gleaning more information from between the lines than a mystic can glean from a crystal ball.

The news item had to do with one Phillip Jarrett, owner of the Star outfit up in the Mogollon country, who trailed, overtook and shot it out with three rustlers. Flip was wounded during the fight, but the three rustlers were planted afterwards—which made him, obviously, a man to reckon with.

That much the paper told her. The rest of it Ann told herself. Flip Jarrett didn't like crooks and he was here, where the crooks were trying to get a strangle hold on the country. Whether he had sold his ranch in the Mogollons and was looking for a new location or whether he was merely passing through didn't matter. With his weight added to the protection promised by old Sheriff Lemmon, the *San Simon Journal* would be rolling off the press for a long time to come.

The possibility that Flip Jarrett might be interested only in crooks who were bothering his cattle never occurred to her.

Ann had already slipped out of her apron and was hanging it on a nail beside the type case when her dad entered, stepping furtive-

ly through the back door and closing it softly behind him. Ann knew, from the worried shadows in his dark eyes, that he hadn't found the sheriff.

"Hasn't been anybody see him all day long," Gig Daley said tightly. "I don't know what to think."

"He wouldn't run out on us. He wants to catch Owen Beck at some dirty work just as badly as we do."

"Yes, I know. But, Ann—are you willing to go through with this without any protection?"

"I would be, yes," Ann said quickly, "but I know where I can get help. Flip Jarrett—"

"That gunfighter from the Mogollon?"

"Yes. He was just in here to file a classified, and if I explain the setup to him—"

"You stay away from him," Daley said flatly. "Men like him are dangerous."

"Yes, I know."

Ann figured she knew even better than did her father, but she wasn't thinking about guns. She was wondering, with a queer, tight breathlessness, what it would take to melt the frost out of those piercing blue eyes.

"You set up your editorial," she said. "I'll be back in a minute. And quit your sputtering! We can't fight the Lazy B by ourselves, can we?"

WHILE her dad was still digesting her unexpected declaration of independence, Ann grabbed a notebook and pencil off the desk and hurried out. She paused just outside the door to run a critical glance down over her gray dress and lift a hand tentatively to her practical if unglamorous hairdo. Then she shrugged.

This was business. Urgent business.

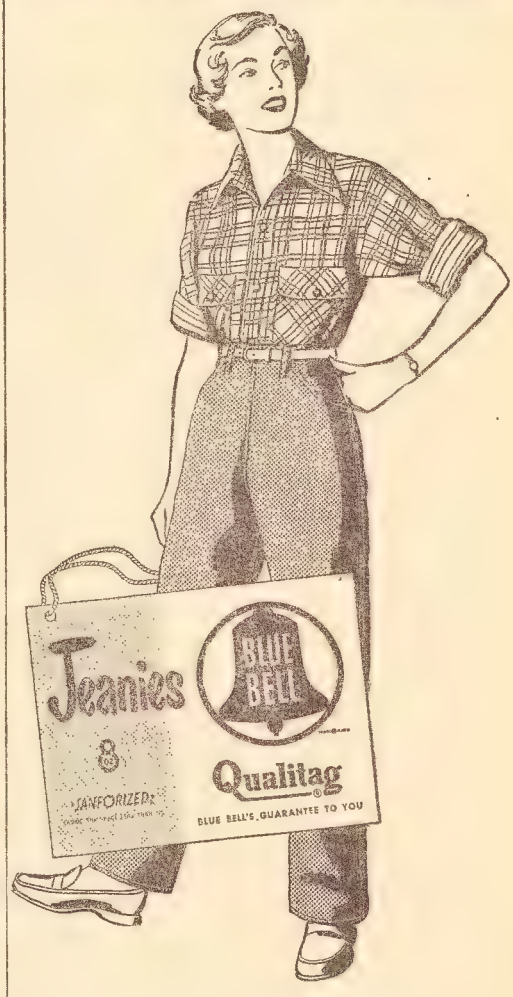
She paused in the small hotel lobby only long enough to inquire whether or not Mr. Jarrett was in.

"Yes'm."

"Which room?"

"Number Eight. But, Miss—"

How to buy better work and play clothes



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Ann was already on her way toward the stairs. "Business," she said and smiled disarmingly over her shoulder.

By the time she reached the door of Number 8, however, her knees were rattling like loose boards in a high wind, and her heart seemed to have expanded until there was no room left in her chest for air. It was just, she told herself, that she was not used to visiting strange young men in their hotel rooms. The fact that Flip Jarrett was on the ruggedly attractive side, with a grin as dazzling as the noon-day sun, had nothing to do with it.

She lifted one hand, saw that it was trembling and promptly clubbed it into a little fist, which she hammered against the door with a great deal more authority than she felt. The door opened almost immediately, and Ann didn't give Flip a chance to decide whether or not he wanted to ask her in. She just went, her notebook in one hand and her pencil in the other.

"I'm the reporter for the *Journal*," she said, "and—"

At that point she made a mistake. She looked at him. He had a towel in his left hand, which he was runing absently up his freshly scrubbed face to his equally fresh hair and on down the back of his neck. With the dust off his face and his brown hair kinking up under the moisture, he looked younger and less like granite, although the cool speculative light was still there in his eyes.

"You haven't had any word on that horse yet." He wasn't asking her; he was telling her.

"Not on the horse, no, but you see—Well, Mr. Jarrett, you're not exactly a stranger to folks around here and we thought—Well, folks would like to know—"

Ann gave up, her tongue frozen stiff by the hard glint that had sprung into his eyes. He threw the towel on the bed and straightened, his thumbs hooked in his belt, his gaze boring into her nervous system—or so it felt.

"Folks would like to know, would they?" he said deliberately. "Well, you can tell 'em I'm not gunnin' for anybody. I'm lookin' for a ranch, not trouble."

"A ranch?" Ann swallowed painfully, still shivering under his cold stare. "I—I know a place you'd like," she stammered. "Out on Turkey Creek. It's beautiful, and there's a lovely spot to build a cabin, back in the timber."

"Ye-e-ah? What do you want, Sis?"

"Want?"

"Yeah. Want."

His blunt statement knocked the wind out of her. Of all the brusque, impolite, uncooperative—! About the time Ann ran out of adjectives she decided that if he wanted to make this conversation short and sweet, she'd make it shorter and sweeter.

Momentarily forgetting that she was a reporter, and a lady to boot, she kicked the door shut and said bluntly, "I want help."

"I knew that. Who is he?"

"Owen Beck. He's mean and—"

"You want him killed, huh?"

"Killed? No!"

"Then why did you come to me?"

Ann shuddered, took another look at Flip Jarrett and decided her imagination had talked too much. She said haltingly, "I thought maybe—"

"Just want him run out of town, huh?" Flip's eyes were growing colder by the minute. "You've come to the wrong place, lady. You didn't have time to monkey with me until you found out who I was. Now if you think I'm going to buy into your two-bit squabbles, you've got another think coming. My guns aren't for sale, and neither am I."

Ann blew a fuse. "Nobody's trying to buy you!" she exploded. "I wouldn't have you if you were free, you conceited, long-legged chunk of coyote!"

She gasped as he grabbed her and jerked her up against him, the hands on her arms as unyielding as steel vises. She could hear the hard pound of his heart, but at

least it wasn't fluttering. Hers sure was.

"When a man tries to cuss me out," he said deliberately, "I slug him. When a woman tries it—"

He didn't finish the sentence. He didn't have to because he demonstrated, then and there. Before Ann could even blink, he was kissing her with a fiery ardor that was at complete variance with his cold manner. Ann had wondered if his kiss would be revolting and now she found out. It very definitely wasn't.

In fact, it so much wasn't that Ann kissed him right back in spite of her declaration that she wouldn't have him on any terms. She got her hands on his back, pulled herself up on her toes and threw her heart into her work.

He was the one who broke it off, jerking his head up suddenly and staring down at her with an expression almost of shock. Abruptly he shoved her back, stepped to the door and threw it wide open. Then he turned, one hand on the knob, the other on his hip, regarding her with a steady intense gaze.

"It's no wonder to me," he drawled, "that Owen Beck is givin' you trouble, but I'm on his side. Good day, ma'am."

ANN didn't even wait to try to find the breath she'd lost. She just pulled out, walking through the door with her chin up, her cheeks glowing and her eyes fastened on nothing at all. Down through the lobby she floated, aware of the clerk's keen scrutiny but not letting it for one moment interrupt the measured sedateness of her stride. Then as she reached the door, she heard his skeptical grunt.

"Business, huh?"

Ann let herself out the door, closed it carefully behind her and then took off, grabbing at her skirt with both hands and running as if the devil himself were after her. Maybe he was. At least, the memory of a devil.

She didn't even slow down as she passed the print shop, fogging it on to the little frame house she kept for her dad, and entering almost before she had time to open the door. Only when she ran into the kitchen table did she stop, and then she waited what seemed hours before her breath and her ideas caught up with her.

Carefully she rounded up her thoughts, making a clean sweep of her mental range; but when she got the herd gathered she found it was just a big collection of Flip Jarretts.

Abruptly Ann turned her hands and her attention to the preparation of the evening meal, trying to ignore the way her heart was flippity-flopping around inside her chest. She stirred up the fire, warmed up the beans and coffee, fried ham—and then discovered she wasn't hungry. Well, her dad would be, and he'd need a full stomach to carry him through this night's work.

Sometime during the preparation of that meal, Ann's common sense came home, unnoticed. Maybe Flip Jarrett had a grin and a kiss that could knock her silly, but he had demonstrated beyond doubt that he was a cold-blooded hyena who was looking out strictly for Flip Jarrett. Strangely, that realization did not bring the discouragement Ann would have expected. Instead, it brought a new wave of implacable determination.

It was dark by the time Ann left the house, slipping out the back door and taking a circuitous route that would enable her to get a good look at Main Street without showing herself. Painstakingly she scouted the town and didn't see a single Lazy B horse anywhere.

With a little sigh of relief, she hurried to the shop and slipped in the back door. Her dad was just locking the last form, his slender figure bent with fatigue but his eyes snapping.

"They've pulled out," Ann said, involuntarily keeping her voice low. "You go on home and eat."

"All right." Daley straightened to wipe

a sleeve across his damp face. "She's all ready to go. We'll run her off as soon as I get back."

"You betcha," Ann said with satisfaction. "We'll have this old sheet scattered all over the country before Owen gets back in here in the morning."

"Yeah." Her dad eyed her with a crooked grin. "And that's when the real battle starts. How about that Flip—"

"You go home and eat," Ann interrupted hastily, "before things get cold."

Her dad's eyes squinted thoughtfully as he studied her, but without a word he shrugged into his coat and went out the back door.

Ann turned the hanging lamps as low as possible. Then, securing a hammer, some tacks and some heavy wrapping paper, she began fashioning shades for the three dusty windows. She was standing on a stool, tacking the paper over the second window, when she became aware of someone behind her. She glanced over her shoulder, then whirled with a gasp, lost her balance and fell into Owen Beck's waiting arms. One of his big hands clamped over her mouth before she could scream.

He set her on her feet, ignoring the fact that she cringed away from the hard glitter in his eyes. "I figured you were tryin' to pull a fast one," he said tightly "even before I saw you call on Jarrett. The big bad tough boy wouldn't bite, would he?"

Ann was too terrified to answer, even if her mouth had been free. She saw the two men with Owen, dark-garbed, hard-looking riders, and she shuddered uncontrollably.

"You don't need to be scared," Owen told her with a taunting drawl. "I'm not going to hurt you, but I can't have you spoiling my plans at this stage of the game. We got a date to be married tomorrow, remember?"

He jerked his head at one of the men, who stepped forward to hold her while Owen tied a bandanna over her mouth.

"You hang onto her," he ordered, "while I write a letter to her dad. Let's see." He procured pencil and paper and leaned over the stone. "I'll just tell him if he thinks this notice is more important than Ann is—to go ahead and print it."

Ann saw him write the note and leave it in plain sight on the form before she was hustled outside and boosted into a saddle. She was not tied, but one of the men held her until Owen rode up beside her and grabbed her shoulder.

"You ride out of this town quiet and peaceful," he said grimly, "or your dad won't be in shape to print nothin'."

Ann jerked the bandanna off her face and threw it at him. Then she gathered up her reins and kicked her horse out after the man who was leading off.

THE moon had come up, brilliant and soft, by the time they cut out of town toward the north, riding slowly until the lights dwindled away behind them. Then they jumped into a lope, continued north until they hit a hard rocky country that would effectually kill their tracks and circled back in a wide arc that brought them, eventually, to the Lazy B.

As they passed the corrals, Ann saw a big horse standing off by himself, watching them with prick-eared interest. He was a sorrel, with a blazed face and four white stockings. The fact that he was standing apart from the other horses was a pretty good indication that he was a stranger to this corral, and Ann had no doubt that it was Flip Jarrett's horse. But why in the world would Owen Beck steal one lone saddle horse when he had hundreds of his own?

Ann was still wondering when she was lifted out of her saddle and carried into the house, where one lamp glowed dully.

"Over the threshold, my dear," Owen said with a smug grin. "Reckon I'll have to repeat the ceremony tomorrow after we're married."

"Put me down," Ann snapped and gave

him a kick on the leg that persuaded him to do it.

"Sit down and make yourself comfortable," Owen invited. "I'll leave you alone unless you try to get away. Then—" He finished with a shrug and a dark glance that sent an ice-cold shiver through Ann.

She walked around the room three times, restlessly, before she plopped onto the sofa with a savage grunt. Owen and the two men with him sat down at the table. A fourth man came from the kitchen carrying cups and a coffee pot. Ann didn't want any coffee and said so bluntly when the invitation was extended.

She had to get away from here, but she couldn't for the life of her see how she was going to do it. Her dad might not even report her absence in the fear that it would make her plight worse. He would probably just go ahead and print the paper—without the all-important notice—in the belief that Ann would be returned when the issue was settled.

She'd be returned, all right—as Owen Beck's wife!

Ann was rapidly sinking clear out of sight in the quicksand of despair when the front door swung wide open and Flip Jarrett stepped into the room, followed by Sheriff Lemmon. Both of them had guns in their hands.

"You jiggers are under arrest," Lemmon said harshly, "for stealin' a horse, a sheriff and a girl. Get 'em up!"

Owen Beck slid out of his chair, his face distorted with rage. "You can't prove I kidnapped you," he snarled. "You were blindfolded all the time."

"How do you know that?" Flip cut in coolly.

He waited a moment for an answer that was not forthcoming from Owen, who realized too late that he had talked too much.

"I found him out here in the barn," Flip went on in that same unruffled tone, "all wrapped up for mailin'. You know, Beck, if you're gonna steal many horses in order to kidnap sheriffs, you ought to get a horse that don't toe in so bad you can't miss his track. I spotted your bronc in town, and all I had to do was watch for the man that got on him."

For a second Owen stood rigid, glaring his hatred. Then he lurched suddenly into the table as he grabbed for his gun. The table, holding the lamp, turned over, its crash lost in the roar of guns; but just before the room was plunged into darkness, Ann saw Owen Beck going down, his arms waving convulsively.

Ann threw herself face down on the sofa, her hands over her ears, her eyes as tightly shut as she could get them. She was aware that the gunfire ceased, but she still didn't want to look up, couldn't make herself look to see whether or not Flip Jarrett had been hit. Then she felt strong hands on her shoulders, pulling her to her feet and wrapping her up tight against a hard chest.

That chest felt familiar, somehow.

"Miss, I sure had you wrong," Flip said humbly. "I thought—Well, hell, I sold out up in the Mogollon because folks were always wanting me to fight their battles for 'em. I'm not a gunfighter, miss. All I want to do is run a ranch." He hesitated, then said awkwardly, "You—like Turkey Creek?"

"Oh, yes," Ann said, looking up quickly. "It's perfect."

"Then I reckon I'll buy it." His head was coming down slowly, and Ann could feel herself getting all ready to go up on her toes again. Just as his lips brushed her cheek, he added in a whisper, "But you'll have to show me where you want the house."

By Diane Austin

When Rory refused to donate his collection of pioneer relics, Amy decided to settle—for Rory.

Cuddle and Collect

EVER since Frank Collins had arrived in Furnace Creek two months ago, a heap of changes had been made. For one thing, Amy Butler had left off sighing over Rory Douglas long enough to let Frank come courting. For another, Amy and the rest of the members of the Ladies Sewing and Stitching Circle, upon Frank's gentle urging, had retitled themselves the Ladies Historical Society and had decided to raise the necessary funds to build a museum.

It was a downright shame, Frank had orated powerfully, that a town as historical as Furnace Creek, the very cradle of our frontier, should not have an enduring mon-

ument to its name. And so the ladies had laid down their embroidery and taken up the cause of the museum.

And now that the money, amassed from dues and donations, lay safe in the bank, an ornery, insinuating article had been written in the Furnace Creek *Free Press,* to the effect that: "Well, looks like we have a sure-enough museum on the way to satisfy the Ladies Historical Ex-Sewing Society. But what do they intend keeping in it? Dust?"

It was an uncommon good question, too. But still, not to be bushwhacked, the very next day the good ladies of the Society unanimously voted in a proposal that was to solve their difficulties.

Four of the youngest members were to canvass all the ranches in the rangeland outlying Furnace Creek, asking for historical relics, while still another four were to go from house to house in the town itself. Amy, because she had seen exciting prospects in the relic roundup, and also because she was Treasurer and felt it her duty to the Society, had been among the first to volunteer. She had been assigned to the north section—from the boundary line of the Circle W to the line of the Tumbling D.

And that's why it was on this particular afternoon that Amy was sitting in a buckboard rattling across the bumpy ground, her heart thudding faster and faster as she neared her last stop, the Tumbling D.

The back of the wagon looked like a pack rat's lodgings. So far she had been able to collect a couple of hundred arrowheads, Indian pottery, seven tomahawks, a broken wheel from an early prairie schooner, some crumbling newspapers dated thirty years before, a few skinning knives and a rusty old musket. Every time she went over an exceptionally lumpy piece of trail, the noise was something gosh-awful to hear.

But Amy paid that no never-mind—she was too concerned with seeing Rory Douglas again. True, the only time he had ever spoken to her was the day he had appeared at her father's ranch to ride the rough string; but still, there was nothing she had forgotten about him. His shock of corn-colored hair, the boyish-looking features, that lithe and broad-shouldered frame . . . Least of all would she forget the high-handed way he had taken the slack out of her dabbin' loop.

From the opera house that day Amy had thrilled to the deftness with which he had busted those horses that had never felt the saddle. Later, she had ambled over to him, her wind-tossed hair spilling in a dark cloud over slim shoulders, blue eyes shining, her lips moistly parted.

"Rory, you were so wonderful," she had blurted awkwardly. "So—so—"

He had sized her up with one disconcerting bold glance. He had said shortly, "Let's not get carried away now, Ma'am."

His manner was plainly roughshod, but Amy wasn't to be discouraged that easily. For here was a man after her own heart—she hoped!

"I'm giving a little whing-ding sort of this Saturday night," she heard herself saying warmly. "I'd—I'd like you to come, Rory."

Once more his glance traveled over her, but this time at a slow and lingering pace.

"Sure you would," he had said with drawling deliberation. "You'd like me to put my arms around you, too. You'd like me to kiss you, the way you're hungry to be kissed." He hitched up his worn jeans. "But that ain't no sign," Rory Douglas had said, "that I'm gonna do any o' those things."

And with that he had walked away.

Amy had never exchanged another word with him since that day, but there were times when she still dreamed of Rory Douglas and what it would be like to have his arms around her. Any other hombre in Furnace Creek, especially Frank Collins, would have swapped ends if she had so much as smiled at him, she knew; but

this hard, cold hombre intrigued her in spite of herself.

Rory had blown into Furnace Creek a little over four months ago. He had bought the old Stilson homestead, renamed it the Tumbling D—although it was known roundabouts as the Tumbling Down—and kept it going by hiring out as a breaker of wild horses. No one knew where he had come from, but then no one seemed to care. Amy alone hoped that he wouldn't be lighting out again.

Now, she pulled up directly in front of the old ranch house and jumped down. She ran up the three steps, crossed the small porch and knocked. She knocked again.

From inside she heard the approaching scuffle of heavy boots. A voice was muttering, "Thunderation! A man don't even have a chance to sit down and have a peaceable meal nowadays without someone beatin' down his door . . . I'm comin'!"

The door swung open. Rory Douglas stood there, wiping his hands on a kerchief. "Well? What do *you* want?"

Amy stepped back, her prepared speech all smashed to pieces. "I—I—"

"If you don't know what you want, then how come you beat on the door? Look, I'm eatin' and I can't—"

She said firmly, "I'd like just a few moments of your time."

"My time is money and I can't waste none of it," he retorted. "I've got a job of bronc peelin' to do over at the Slash M and I can't stand around here chawin' the fat. Now say your piece and vamoose!"

Amy took a deep breath. "I'm from the museum—" she began, all wrong.

"And downright well-preserved you are, too," he said with a surprising flash of wry humor.

Settling herself to rights, she started in again. "I'm from the Ladies Historical Society and I came to see if you have any relics or any other historical doodads here that we could put in the new museum as soon as it's built."

His eyes, blue as hers, squinted at her. "Come in," he invited abruptly, and it seemed to her that his tone had softened a little.

HE HELD the door open and she moved inside. This, reflected Amy, was more like it.

"You look around while I finish up my eating," he said, and walked off.

She went over to the smoke-grimed fireplace, seeking what little warmth its dying embers afforded. Suddenly, though, she gave a start and peered more closely. Above the mantel was hung an old long-barreled rifle. And the initials on the stock read—*S. S.*

S. S. could stand for none other than Sam Stilson, the fighting blacksmith who had tamed Furnace Creek practically single-handed and had established it as a town! Amy, in all her bemusement at seeing Rory again, had plumb forgotten that by buying the old Stilson place he had also become owner of the most valuable relic of all. Why, this very rifle must be the shooting iron with which Sam Stilson had blazed out a settlement in the wilderness!

Excitedly now, Amy glanced around the room. Those twin holsters over there on the side wall—those, too, must have been the famous pioneer's. And right over the door was a horseshoe, one of his stock-in-trade. And there was a quiver of arrows and a colorful bow. . . .

And then she became aware that Rory Douglas had loomed up in the doorway. She built a smile for him. "You sure have a right fine collection here, Mr. Douglas."

"The name's Rory. You said it fast enough last time we met."

Amy reddened and hated herself for the telltale flush. What kind of unfeeling hombre was he anyway?

She said again, doggedly, "Well, you sure have a mighty fine collection."

"Why, that's nothin'," he returned amiably. "I've also got Sam Stilson's sheriff

badge somewhere around, and his saddle, and—oh a heap of other things."

"Blazes, but won't the other gals be flabbergasted!" Amy was wide-eyed. "Will you help me load the works into the wagon?"

A look of surprise came over his face. "Hold on there. You said you came to see if I had any relics, right?"

"Yes . . ."

"Well," pointedly, "you saw. I didn't say nothin' about givin' anything away."

"But I—"

"Give me one good reason why I should? I bought 'em fair 'n square."

In desperation Amy floundered, "But aren't you historical-minded?"

"Sure I am," he snapped back, all at once the ruthless stranger again. "I think Furnace Creek's deservin' of a museum, but I can't say I like the way you're goin' about it. It's a *Ladies* Historical Society, ain't it? So what's Frank Collins doin' runnin' the whole shebang?"

"Why—why—" stammered Amy, taken somewhat aback by this outburst and by the mention of Frank's name. "It was his idea in the first place. He made all those speeches to us and he's gonna take care of the building of the museum and—and he even put some money in the fund!"

Rory Douglas looked interested. "How much?"

"A dollar," sheepishly.

"Ha!"

She bristled. "Frank Collins has our best interests at heart. He's an unselfish, spirited gentleman!" She didn't see fit to add at this time that he was rather a polished suitor as well.

"He's a no-good swindler and a hornswoggler!" Rory countered. "He's just throwin' dust in your eyes, and until you ladies unhitch him from your apron strings, not a lick of Sam Stilson's stuff do you get from me!"

He scooped up his Stetson from where it lay on the table, and headed for the door.

Not even knowing what impelled her, Amy moved. She ran forward and caught at his elbow. And then, suddenly, he was towering above her, glaring down fiercely.

"That's right," he ground out. "I did forget somethin'." Then he grabbed her. "You spoiled my lunch," he muttered. "But you're sure not gonna rob me of my dessert!"

His lips came down on hers, hard. Amy fought him silently, struggling to wrench away from that savage impact . . . while her mouth clung, gladly and helplessly.

And when, at last, she was still and limp in his arms, no longer fighting, no longer struggling, he let her go.

Somehow ashamed of the hot sweetness that was pouring through her, Amy lunged forward and beat wildly on his chest.

"You yellow-livered varmint!" she screamed. "Only an hombre with rattlesnake blood in his veins would—"

And then she heard him laugh. A soft, rippling chuckle that cascaded up into a torrent of mirth. "Lady, did you say you were from the Historical—or *Hysterical* Society?"

She rushed out of the house as he held the door open for her, her humiliation even greater than her rage. Above the rattle and clatter of the buckboard she could still hear his devilish laughter following her. And though the breeze was cool against her face, she could still feel the heat of his scorching kiss.

EARLY the next morning the members of the Historical Society began arriving at Amy's ranch, carting buckboards and wagons full of the relics they had rounded up the day before—and which were now to be stored in an unused shed until the museum was ready. Altogether, the girls had made quite a haul, and Amy was feeling more and more ashamed over not having been able to add Sam Stilson's mementos to the collection.

She dreaded being asked about it, but

later in the day the question came. Mrs. Harper, who was president of the Society, had stopped by to deposit a wooden cradle used by the first baby born in Furnace Creek. She eyed the relics in the shed appraisingly, then turned abruptly to Amy.

"Amy, you had the Tumbling D in your territory, didn't you?"

Eyes averted, Amy nodded.

"Then where are Sam Stilson's things?" Mrs. Harper went on. "I'm mighty sure Rory Douglas must have come into possession of at least some of his blacksmith tools and his guns. Maybe even more."

Amy fidgeted nervously with the flap of her skirt pocket. "He wouldn't give them up," she got out at last.

"Wouldn't give them up?" Mrs. Harper looked astonished. "Well, why not?"

She couldn't tell her what Rory had said about Frank Collins. It would sound too—well, too disloyal. "He—he just wouldn't," she mumbled. Then added, somewhat belatedly, "I tried."

Mrs. Harper sniffed, and it seemed to Amy that the other woman eyed her rather coldly. "Mr. Collins has been waiting for us to turn the money over to him so he can get started with the museum building," she said. "But I for one don't see how we can have a Furnace Creek museum without Sam Stilson's things. I'll tell Mr. Collins he'll just have to wait a little longer."

With that she marched off to her waiting buckboard, and Amy, looking after her, heaved a sorrowful sigh. It certainly looked as though Frank Collins would have to wait a lot longer than anyone knew.

THAT night Amy was curled up in a chair in the living room, patching a pair of snagged jeans, when she had a caller. The man who stepped into the house was tall and slick looking, with brown wavy hair and a tiny mustache that was freshly greased and pointed.

Amy's heart sank a little as she saw who it was, because she had an uneasy suspicion of what it was that had brought Frank Collins to her ranch this evening. Slowly, she put down her sewing and got up to greet him.

First rattle out of the box, just as she had feared, he demanded, "What's this I've been hearin'?"

"I—I don't know," she replied lamely. "What about?"

"Mrs. Harper tells me that we can't go ahead with the museum on account of some jughead won't part with his relics!"

Amy nodded. She repeated her words to Mrs. Harper. "I tried—but Rory Douglas just wouldn't give them up."

"So he wouldn't give them to you, eh?" Frank slipped his arm around her waist, then tilted her chin so that she had to look directly into his impelling gaze. "Why not?"

And Amy found herself telling him the whole story. Of how Rory had invited her in and let her look at the wonderful array of relics, and of how he had point blank refused to give them up because he had distrusted the whole scheme. She even told Frank about the dessert Rory had taken from her lips, even though she had misgivings about whether it pertained to anything historical or not.

When she had finished, Frank seemed to be pondering a moment or two, and then he let out a triumphant exclamation. "Aha! Now I see! Beautiful, it isn't that that jasper distrusts me—he's plain downright jealous!"

Amy's mouth flew open, and she let it remain that way while she stared at him in stupefaction. "Jealous?" she echoed finally. "But how could he be?"

And then, of course, she saw. Frank had hit the nail smack on the head! It was all clear as daylight to her now, and explained a number of things away, among them Rory Douglas' high-falutin attitude toward her. He had undoubtedly taken stock of how steadily Frank had been courting her and must have heard the local specula-

tions and gossip. And so he was jealous. . . . The thought made Amy smile. She remembered Rory's kissing the day before, and the smile grew even more radiant.

But Frank was saying, "So there's only one way for you to make him give up the relics, sweet."

"Huh?" Amy blinked. She had completely forgotten about the relics, Ladies Historical Society, museum and all.

Frank grinned. "You'll just stop makin' him jealous. You'll cotton up to him like he was molasses and you a fly. You lay on the sugared words and the hugs and kisses thick and fast enough, and you'll be surprised to see how quick he comes around."

Deep furrows appeared in Amy's brow as she considered his words. It was really her duty, wasn't it, to have another go at getting those relics for the Furnace Creek Museum? And sugared words and hugs and kisses—they were right down her arroyo . . . And it would be a chance to see Rory Douglas come out of that thick-skinned hide of his. . . .

"I'll do it!" she declared.

"Good girl." He squeezed her, then caught her up in the circle of his embrace. "But right now, Douglas isn't here, and what he don't know won't hurt us any."

He bent his head, and the points of his mustache tickled Amy's cheek just before his lips fell on hers. It was a smooth and practiced kiss, good and unhurried, too. Amy relaxed and even kissed him back, and all the time she was thinking of how she would soon be making a return trip to Rory Douglas and the Tumbling D.

Frank drew away, and he wore a broad smile of satisfaction. "That sure tasted like more," he said. "Reckon I'll stay on a spell and we'll turn the lights down low and—"

"No," murmured Amy. "You'd best leave now, Frank. I've got sewing to do." She was thinking that she wanted to be

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alone, to plot out her course of action. She was thinking that any other time it would be fun kissing in the dark with Frank Collins—but not right now, when she was dead bent on hogtying another hombre's heart.

THE next afternoon Amy was again on her way to the Tumbling D. She had decided to use the buckboard again, not only because there was the chance she might be carting stuff back in it, but also because it gave her an excuse to wear her best green silk, with the tight-squeezed waistline and the low-cut neckline. It wasn't exactly a daytime dress, true, nor the kind that an insensible critter like Rory Douglas would be likely to appreciate. But then, thought Amy, when it came to men, you never could tell.

When she arrived, she discovered the place to be empty. But since the door had been left off the latch, she walked right in. Straight off, she stole a glance at the relics which hung so invitingly on the walls. It was a great temptation, all right. Only, what was the use of rustling, if the hombre was bound to know sure as shootin' who did it?

The place looked as though two wildcats had set up housekeeping in it. No wonder folks called the Tumbling D the Tumbling Down. Rory was probably out bronc bustin' somewhere, and as long as she had to wait for him, Amy set about fixing things to rights. She picked up strewn articles of clothing, did the dishes that had been left on the kitchen table, found a broom standing in the corner and let it fly.

Now for some dusting. The first thing that caught her eye was the horseshoe which hung over the door. Judging from all the cobwebs on it, it couldn't have been touched since the day it was put up.

She pulled over a chair, stood up on it and reached out. Barely had her fingers touched the metal, when all of a sudden shivers and chills chased each other up her spine. Something was stroking her ankles!

"Oh!"

And then she looked down and saw the top of a blond head. And then the grinning face that was upturned toward her. Now the hands encircled her ankles.

"Rory Douglas! You let me go!"

"Why should I? Now that I've caught you in the act!"

"Let me go, or I'll hit you with this!" She gestured at the horseshoe.

He muttered a little but removed his hands.

"Now help me down," she ordered.

"With pleasure," he said. Suddenly he kicked the chair out from under her—and just caught her before she fell.

He set her on her feet again. "Got you red-handed, didn't I?" he accused. "You horse thief!"

"Horse thief!"

"Well then—horseshoe thief. Fixin' to steal the relics, huh, for your fool museum."

Amy faced him with rising anger. "I wasn't fixing to steal anything. I just thought I'd wipe off some of those cobwebs. And a lot of thanks I get! Look how I cleaned up the litter in here!"

"A likely story," he grumbled, but his eyes shifted quickly around the room.

Remembering her mission, Amy said, quite meekly, "I just reckoned I'd make myself useful while I waited."

His glance softened somewhat, but he kept it nailed to her until she thought her skin would burn from the warm intensity of his gaze.

"Waited for what?" he asked finally. "Now that you mention it, what *did* you come here for?"

"Why, Rory . . ." And here Amy let her long dark lashes sweep up imploringly. "Can't a gal come a visiting if she wants to? Specially if a certain hombre won't come visiting her."

Rory backed off a little. Plainly he wasn't at all sure what this was about. And also plainly, he wasn't gonna make any moves until he found out.

Amy sidled up to him, put her hands on his shoulders. "You didn't have to make up that windy about Frank Collins being a swindler," she crooned.

"I—didn't?"

"Uh-uh. I know why you're so set against him. You're just plumb jealous!"

Rory was going to say something then, but what it was Amy never knew. Because raising up on tip-toe she kissed him lightly on the mouth. It started out as a light kiss, that is, but in the next moment it got completely out of hand and ran wild. Amy found herself somehow clutching at him, while his arms came around and pressed her against him and his lips held hers in a clinging, mouthmelting fastness. This was no mere dessert kiss—this was the whole menu!

When she slipped out of his embrace, laughter danced flirtatiously in her blue eyes. "See—" she challenged. "You don't have to be jealous at all."

Rory had been regarding her still as if he couldn't make up his mind as to her motives. But now he broke out into a lazy sort of sidewise grin. "Nope," he said. "Reckon I don't have to be one speck jealous. You're my girl all right—all mine."

Amy was bubbling with joy. Everything was working out wonderfully. "Then you'll let me have the relics now, won't you, Rory?"

The grin washed off of his face, and the look in his eyes was now one of dark suspicion.

Amy didn't like that look. To cover her uneasiness she rushed out a passel of words. "The reason I want them in such a hurry is because we can't hand over the money to Frank Collins to build the museum until we've got Sam Stilson's relics in tow."

Rory's hand shot out and caught at her shoulder. He shook her almost viciously. "Is that all you've been waitin' for?" he demanded. "Once you've got the stuff you're ready to go on with your plans?"

Amy nodded, almost breathlessly. She kept her eyes glued to his face. And then once again the grin came forth.

"Why sure, honey," he said easily. "You should have told me that the whole museum depended on me. Reckon I've had a change of heart after all." He added softly, "In more ways than one."

He bent swiftly then and kissed her full on the lips. And while her mouth was still tingling, he went on to say, "But don't you think a great occasion like the start of the museum calls for—well, some big celebration?"

Amy said slowly, "I suppose so. I *could* throw a shindig at my ranch next Saturday. And we *could* make a big to-do about handing over the money to Frank."

"Fine," said Rory. "That's exactly what I had in mind."

After that he collected the relics for her and helped load them in the wagon. And after the last relic was in place, and Amy was about to climb up on the wagon seat, he held her close for a minute and they kissed a lengthy good-by.

Amy was already in sight of her ranch gates when it suddenly occurred to her to wonder exactly how come Rory had given in so easily. And then she sat bolt upright in the seat. He *had* been jealous. Why, he must even be in love with her . . .

THE great blowout in honor of the Furnace Creek museum was all set for that following Saturday evening at Amy's ranch house. The ladies of the Historical Society were making a great fuss about which gown to wear, and the unmarried ones about who was to escort them. Amy was to fetch the money from the bank, and at the party there would be a regular little ceremony made of her presenting the

strong-box to Frank Collins. Mrs. Harper had even rehearsed a little speech for it.

At last the big night arrived. Amy was in her bedroom, admiring her reflection in a light blue satin gown that the sweet curves of her young figure did wonders for, when her father poked his head in the door and announced that the first guest had appeared.

It was Rory Douglas. And when Amy, unmindful of anything else, flew to him, he caught her hands and held her off gently. "I came early," he said, "on account of I've got a kind of surprise for you."

Delighted, she asked, "What is it?"

"This." He drew a derringer from his pocket, leveled it at her. "Where's that money?"

Amy knew that her eyes and ears must be playing tricks on her. Rory couldn't be threatening her with a weapon and asking for the museum money. He loved her. Hadn't she figured that out for herself only the other day?

"Hurry up," he fairly barked at her. "We haven't got much time."

Amy found her voice, annoyed that it should shake so. "Rory—you—you're just fooling, aren't you?"

"This'll show you how much I'm foolin'," and he made a menacing gesture with the gun. "Now lead me to that there dinero. Pronto!"

"Why, you—" Amy began, but when he jabbed the derringer in her side, she stalked off toward the kitchen pantry where she had put the strong-box for safekeeping.

No wonder he had been so willing to give her the relics, she was thinking fiercely. The moment he had heard that fetching the money from the bank depended on him producing Sam Stilson's stuff, he had handed it over fast enough. And come to think of it, it was even he who had suggested having the party, knowing full well that she'd be bound to have the money there.

But what hurt most of all—even more than the fact that he had betrayed her with his lying kisses—was the bitter knowledge that she had deceived herself into believing that he loved her. Wordlessly she took down the strong-box from the shelf and handed it to him.

He ordered, "Open it up."

Amy did so, and still brandishing the short-barreled derringer he scooped out the sack of money.

From outside just then they heard the sounds of wagon wheels approaching, of drumming hoofbeats. The guests must be arriving.

"Quick," he muttered. He shoved the money sack far back on the pantry shelf, and grabbing up a few filled flour bags, dumped them into the strong-box. Then he locked it.

"All right," he said. "Now we're gonna go out and say hello to folks. And don't you let on that anything's wrong, 'cause remember—I'll be stickin' mighty close."

Amy clenched her fists, swung around sharply and went out into the living room. Soon she was greeting her guests, trying to keep a smile nailed to her face, and pretending not to notice anything strange about Rory Douglas being right behind her shadowing her every move.

Frank Collins arrived just as the fiddlers were tuning up and folks were pairing off on the cleared floor.

"Looks like I'm right in time to have the first dance with you, Amy," he murmured and held out his arms.

But Rory had already wedged himself in between them. "Guess again, hombre," he said with a grim smile. "The lady's spoken for."

And so Amy had to dance with the double-dyed deceiver. Not only the first number but the second and third and all the others as well, because he always managed to keep prospective partners from horning in. And whenever Amy made faltering attempts to escape, he was always

one step ahead of her. She didn't know for sure whether or not he'd dare use the derringer, but she had already learned to her sorrow that with Rory Douglas it didn't pay to take chances.

And then she saw Mrs. Harper beckoning to her from across the room. Evidently it was time to get on with the ceremony.

Rory caught the gesture, too. He said, "All right. Now we'll get the strong-box from the cupboard and you'll go through with your part just like everything was fine."

They went out into the kitchen again. There, with his free hand, Rory took the strong-box from the pantry and held it out to her. But Amy took a determined step back and vigorously shook her head.

"No! You can't make me do it. I won't hand over a mess of flour to Frank Collins. And you called him a swindler!" Her voice swelled in fury.

"You'll do exactly as I tell you!"

"I won't!" she exclaimed again, and reached out as if to strike him. But Rory grabbed her wrist.

"That's how I like my broncs and my women," he gritted. "Spirited. But there ain't a one I can't twist to my likin'!"

Before she could move, her shoulders were pinned to the kitchen wall. "Now," he said tightly. "You're gonna listen to me. For the sake of a few measly relics, you honied up to me just as sweet as thumbs at a taffy pull. You've lied to me; you've been as tricky and deceitful and as double-dealin' as they come. All this time you were lettin' me have your lips and your arms and your softness, not once were you thinkin' of love. Only of how you could get Sam Stilson's possessions for Frank Collins and his phony museum."

"I—" began Amy.

"Well, now I'm gonna teach you a lesson. Now I'm gonna show you!"

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He slammed her shoulders even harder against the wall, and his mouth plunged down on hers, and from the bottomless depths of his contempt he let her have a scorching kiss. It seared the flesh of her lips and sent streams of liquid fire down her throat until she thought she would never know coolness again.

"Now—" said Rory Douglas. "Now we'll take that box in."

And Amy did as he said, though she never knew how she was able to walk in at his side.

THE ceremony began with Mrs. Harper delivering her little speech extolling the virtues of Furnace Creek, the Ladies Historical Society and Frank Collins, respectively. It was then Amy's turn to put the strong-box in Frank's hands.

While all the guests looked on and Frank beamed an encouraging smile, Amy said the appropriate words and handed over the box. Frank now made a short speech of acceptance, and the ceremony was over.

The party got under way again. Once more Amy found herself Rory's prisoner. But this time as he danced he seemed watchful not only for interloping hombres, but for something else as well. Amy felt herself growing tense under his ominous spell. And then, suddenly, his fingers dug into her arm.

"There he goes!" he shouted. "Stop him!"

Amy turned, and everyone in the room turned around, too, to follow the direction of Rory's pointing finger. They all saw the same thing. Frank Collins was skulking near the open patio door, and now as everyone's gaze pinpointed him and Rory again shouted "Stop him!" he darted swiftly outside, the strong-box packed under his arm.

"The money!" Mrs. Harper's shriek rose above everyone else's. "He's lighting out with our money!"

There was a concerted rush for the door and Amy found herself being swept along with everyone else, separated from Rory. She tried to shout that there was nothing in the box but flour, but she couldn't make herself heard above the other yells and dinning exclamations of the angry guests.

They all poured outside just as Frank Collins hit leather on a fleet-footed buckskin. None of the menfolk was armed, and that stopped them, but only for a moment.

"The shed!" someone cried. "The relics are there!"

And then folks were grabbing up tomahawks, arrows, rusty skinning knives, and useless old muskets. They piled into their buckboards and wagons, they leaped onto their horses—and then they all took off after the fleeing Collins.

Amy just stood in the doorway and watched the motley assemblage drive off. She had tried to stop them, but to no avail. She hadn't even been able to make herself heard.

And then she heard a light footfall behind her. Without even turning around she knew who it was.

"He tried to steal our money," she said dully. "He didn't know there was only flour in there."

Rory said, "I figgered he'd try tonight instead of waitin' till later. With all the noise goin' on and folks busy dancin', he must have reckoned the party would be the best time to make his getaway. Too bad the coyote didn't know I'd already beaten him to it."

Amy's heart sank to her satin slippers as she remembered how Rory had kept her his prisoner at the point of a gun all evening. Now she turned to face him, and in her eyes there was a bleak sorrow.

"Sure," she murmured. "You beat him to it. And now I s'pose you're gonna make your getaway with the money. The real money."

For answer he lounged against the door jamb, hands stuffed in his pants pockets. He grinned at her.

"You can s'pose so, but that ain't what I aim to do. I aim to stay put right here till your Historical ladies come back from the chase. And then I'm gonna give their money back to 'em and tell 'em how I saved it from that sneak-thievin' Collins."

Amy heard the words but she wasn't making much sense out of them. Her mind was spinning. She kept her gaze focused on Rory's mouth and heard him go on.

"Like I told you, I figgered from the beginnin' that he was dealin' from the bottom

of the deck with you. I've hit the trail a good bit before settlin' down here, and I've heard 'tell of the phony museum swindle in a coupla other towns. You wouldn't see things my way, so I decided to try and make Collins tip his hole card tonight. And it sure worked out fine!" He chuckled at the remembrance.

Amy understood now. But still . . . "You didn't have to treat me the way you did tonight," she pouted.

"Would you have believed me if I had told you all this beforehand?"

And she knew, of course, that he was right. She wouldn't even have believed that Frank Collins was so attentive to her simply because she was treasurer of the Society. But then she hadn't been the only one to see things in a false light!

Angrily she swung on Rory. "And would you have listened to me if I had told you that I wasn't being sweet to you on account of the blamed relics! And that I meant every kiss I gave you!"

She advanced on him, and he backed hastily into the room. And then all at once her boldness deserted her. She wilted.

"Oh, Rory . . ." she whispered. "I'm so sorry about everything. I don't care about the museum any more, or the Ladies Society even." She added in a small voice, "Just so long as you don't hate me."

"Hate you? What makes you think I hate you?"

"Well, I sort of got a notion. Back there in the kitchen." She sniffed. "And the first time I saw you when you came here. You were hating me all these months!"

But Rory only grinned. "I wasn't hatin' you, honey—I was *breakin'* you. You know, like ridin' the rough string. You got to treat 'em rough at first, and then when they're calmed down and gentled enough, you start feedin' 'em sugar. Women and broncs, they're all alike!"

"Reckon I'm tame enough now, Rory?" she asked softly.

His arms reaching out to enfold her were her answer. And his lips falling on hers with fierce hunger told her even more.

And then her eyes flew open, for the silence was suddenly shattered by the rumble of wheels and the clatter of hoofbeats.

"Rory—they're coming back!"

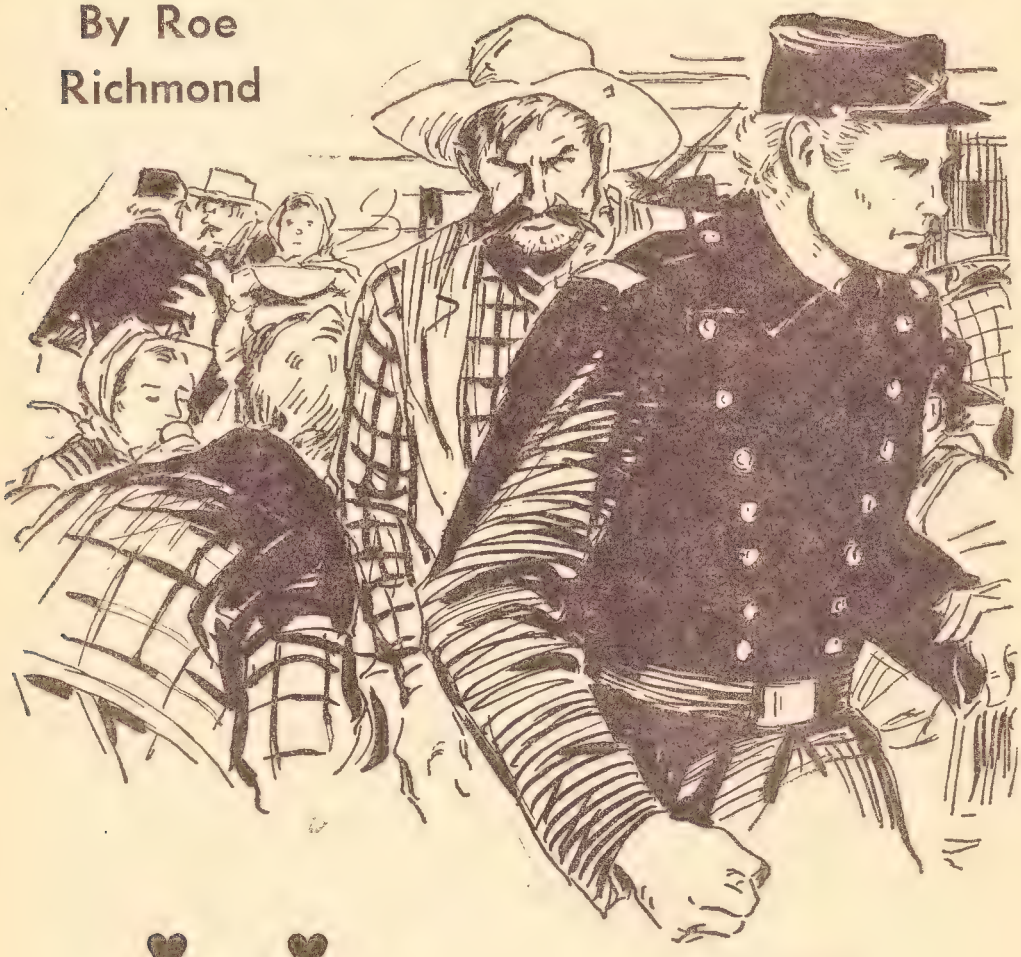
"Let 'em."

Amy heard her father's voice call out to her: "Amy, honey, our man got away!"

She looked up at Rory then, eyes shining. *But mine didn't,* she was thinking blissfully as he kissed her again.

CUPID GOES WEST

By Roe Richmond



♥ ♥

Lovely Mary Ellen found she could be very brave about Apaches—with a stalwart lieutenant to chase them . . . and a handsome wagon boss to chase her!

CHAPTER ONE

Stopover for Romance

NOTHING ever had looked better to Mary Ellen Carey than the stockade wall of Otis Lockett's outpost ahead on the seared brown plain. The wagon train was two weeks out of Camp Grant in the Madrill Basin, and for ten days now it had been hounded by Apaches on the flanks and rear. Gunfire racketed at intervals behind them now, back toward the Ox-Bow where K Company was still fighting off the Indians. Mary Ellen turned on the wagon

"I'm not taking orders from the Army — and neither is Mary!"

seat and smiled a wan, dusty smile at her father.

"Isn't Lockett's half way to Fort Shelley?"

"A little better than that," Jim Carey said, thinking of the Yoder Desert beyond the trading post but not mentioning it.

The girl shifted on the hard seat, aching numbly from the endless jolting. "We didn't have any trouble until the army started escorting us, Dad."

A sober smile touched her father's gaunt face. "You can't blame the army for that, Mary Ellen—even if Dean Hoadley does. We'd have been wiped out way back at Chimney Rocks if the cavalry hadn't been along."

"The Apaches could wipe us out, soldiers and all, if they really tried. I wonder why they haven't, Dad."

"They're not in a hurry," Jim Carey said. "They're enjoying this."

"But they've lost a lot of braves."

"And we've lost a lot of troopers. They can afford it better than we can, Mary Ellen."

The girl stared toward the thin ribbon of Bitterroot Creek, where the stockade was silhouetted against the sun sinking in flames behind the lofty Paladin Peaks. "Well," she said, sighing, "we'll sleep safe tonight."

Jim Carey nodded cheerfully, but he knew that Lockett's offered only temporary respite and sanctuary. They couldn't stay there any length of time; there weren't enough provisions. They'd have to push on across the burning Yoder wastelands to the Cordovan River, and on to Shelley—if they lasted that far. There wouldn't be any reinforcements either, because both Grant and Shelley were pitifully undermanned. He inclined his head, listening to the rifle fire in the rear.

"Young Aydelott's doing a good job back there."

"I suppose so," Mary Ellen said indifferently.

"Hoadley's certainly poisoned you against the army."

"It's not that, Dad. It's just that I prefer *men* to saints in soldier's suits."

Jim Carey laughed quietly. "I doubt if Lieutenant Park Aydelott is a saint, my dear."

"Well, he's certainly not human!"

"Perhaps he's got too much on his mind," chided her father, "to be susceptible to feminine charms."

"It's not that either!" flared Mary Ellen, her cheeks crimsoning under the tan. "It's just that high-and-mighty manner of his. I'd like to see Dean Hoadley take him down a few notches."

"I don't think Dean had better try," Jim observed dryly.

"What's the matter, Dad? Don't you like Dean any more?"

"As well as ever, Mary. But I wouldn't choose him for a son-in-law."

The girl gestured impatiently. "Oh, Daddy! Nobody's thinking of marriage."

"I hope not," Jim Carey said. "But I'm afraid Hoadley is."

Dean Hoadley, the wagon boss, came riding down the line on his big roan gelding. He was a large, powerful man, easy in the saddle, with an air of quiet authority and stolid confidence. His piercing black eyes and rugged features lighted as he saw Mary Ellen, and he reined up on her side.

"Supper at Lockett's, Mary Ellen. Otis' wife is a good cook, too. You folks will join me, I hope?"

"Mary Ellen probably will," Jim Carey said. "I'm going to be busy resplicing that wagon-tongue. How's the rear guard coming?"

Dean Hoadley shrugged his massive shoulders. "The Apaches aren't ready to attack. They're just playing tag for now."

"Quite a few boys are getting killed or hurt in that game."

"That's what soldiers get paid for, Jim."

Jim Carey's voice was bitter: "Thirty cents a day. And no thanks from the civilians whose lives they're saving!"

"I know it's rough, Jim," said Hoadley. "But that's their job. Excuse me, please, and I'll see you at Lockett's, Mary."

Two other riders had joined him, and the three drifted back along the laboring row of dust-shrouded wagons. Fresno Wales was the Indian scout; a small, wiry, wizened man with a narrow hawk-face, beady eyes and a cruel mouth. Chip Gowie, the strong-arm hombre of the outfit, was enormously broad and squat, with long gorilla-like arms and a scarred, brutal face. Mary Ellen didn't like either of these two, but her eyes followed Dean Hoadley with fond interest.

Jim Carey cracked his whip and spat over the wheel. The crackle of guns still sounded from the rear, rising, falling, fading. "A game of tag, is it?" he said. "A wonder those three don't go back and play!"

"Their duty is here with the wagons," Mary Ellen protested.

"All right, girl," sighed her father. "Just don't believe that Dean's as infallible as he thinks he is."

AHEAD, the gates opened as the lead wagon neared the stockade, and soon the Carey vehicle was rumbling and creaking through into the first shelter since Camp Grant. It was a small train, and there was room for all twenty of the wagons within the walls. Dean Hoadley came up with his two assistants to supervise the placement and unloading.

The sun was gone now. The horizon above the jagged Paladins was painted lavishly from it, while twilight settled on the prairie. The firing ceased outside the quadrangle, and what was left of K Company came straggling in, horses and men sweat-drenched, dust-silted and powder-grimed. They were weary to exhaustion, with crude bloody bandages in evidence, and here and there dead bodies draped over saddles. Looking up from his task of unharnessing, old Jim Carey grated his teeth and spat harshly.

"Just playing tag, but they play it rough in this country!"

Mary Ellen looked away, her face twisted and her eyes suddenly scalded with tears.

Lieutenant Park Aydelott and Sergeant Walt Tidmore were the last two riders through the gate. Fat, bewhiskered Otis Lockett was there to greet them.

"How long's this been goin' on, son?" he asked.

"Since Chimney Rocks," said Aydelott. "Ten days, Otis."

Tidmore squirted tobacco juice from his mouth. "All the way, Otis. Past Yellow Butte, through the Needles, into the Ox-Bow. A good thing they don't work nights, or we'd been at it twenty-four hours a day." Dismounting, Tidmore took his horse and the lieutenant's, leading them toward the livery barn.

"How many, Park?" inquired Lockett.

"Hundreds, a whole horde of them, Otis. Enough to overrun us, but they haven't—as yet."

Park Aydelott was a tall, slender young man, sandy-haired and gray-eyed, with a keen aristocratic face. Somehow, even in a filthy, tattered uniform, powder-stained and dirt-glazed, he was a handsome, almost elegant figure, as if some kind of inner cleanness shone through the marks of battle.

"I've got some whiskey, Park," said Otis Lockett.

"Good, the men will need it. Especially the wounded. We lost our medic."

"I'm a pretty fair surgeon. Crude but experienced. There must be a nurse or two in the wagons."

Park Aydelott smiled faintly. "The emigrants don't like us, Otis."

"Even when you've been keepin' Apaches off their necks for ten days?"

"Even so."

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Otis Lockett swore violently. "I'll rout us out some nurses, boy, or they'll camp outside the wall."

"It's the trail boss, Hoadley," said Aydelott. "Apparently he hates uniforms."

"I know him, Park. Always thought he was a good man. Tough and cocky, but fair enough—or seemed to be."

"Maybe it's love," Park Aydelott suggested. "That changes a man. There's a girl with the train, a real beauty . . . . Let's get to the wounded, Otis."

Meanwhile, Dean Hoadley and Mary Ellen Carey had wandered away from the wagons and the emigrants to the deepening shadows of a far corner of the stockade. In his strong magnetic presence, the girl was rapidly forgetting her father's worries, the haggard, haunted faces of the soldiers, the agonizing involuntary moaning of the wounded. Everything faded but the big, rangy, easy-striding man at her side, the deep sure tone of his voice, the firm touch of his hand on her shoulder.

"I wish this was over," Hoadley said. "I want to be alone with you, Mary. I can't think of anything else. Even the Indians don't matter, except as a nuisance."

She laughed nervously. "They're more than that to those poor troopers, Dean."

"I know, I know, but it's just skirmishing, Mary. I've seen some real Indian fighting in my time, and so have Wales and Gowie."

"I should be doing something for those wounded boys though. Dad's awfully disappointed in me, I guess."

"There's enough old women to take care of them. If Aydelott was a smart officer, he wouldn't have let his surgeon be killed."

"He couldn't help that, Dean. What have you got against him anyway? I don't like him either, but after all . . ."

"I know these West Pointers," Hoadley growled. "Everybody else is dirt under their boots."

"Yes, perhaps they are like that, a little." Hoadley laughed. "We're wasting time, Mary—talking. Look at that new moon."

It was rising like a thin, curved blade of gold above the Madrill Mountains. The girl quivered with delight at the frail, shining beauty of it. Then Hoadley's arms were around her, with great but gentle strength, and her face was lifting to his, rapt and eager.

"This is what matters," he murmured. "You and me. All that counts, Mary, is us together—always."

"Yes, Dean, yes," she breathed, her full lips waiting.

His mouth closed down on hers, fiercely yet tenderly, and his mighty arms locked her warm pliant form in a muscular embrace. The delicate m o o n blurred and shimmered; the stars swam dizzily. A mounting joy filled Mary Ellen Carey, brimming over. For a moment there was nothing else in the world—no father, no wagon train, no dead and wounded men in sun-faded blue, no copper-skinned Apaches.

Then, all at once, a strange sense of guilt and shame invaded her, and she twisted to free herself from Hoadley's embrace. He let her go finally, his strong features a trifle sullen, and Mary Ellen leaned weakly on the upright logs of the barrier.

It was understandable that she should think of her father, see his grave kindly face in solemn clarity, but she couldn't comprehend her sudden thought of Park Aydelott. The vision of him as he had looked riding into the stockade, slim and straight and high-headed, his uniform soiled and ragged, his face like a young saint's, powder-blackened and sweat-glistening but pure and boyish all the same.

"We'd better go back now, Dean," she said, calmly and evenly.

"All right, Mary." He had learned better than to crowd her in any high-handed fashion. She had a will and temper of her own, a mind that he respected. "I'm pretty hungry."

Mary Ellen nodded, not hungry herself but wanting to get back to the safety of

lights and people. This big man was getting a powerful grip on her, she realized with some misgiving. More of a hold than any other man ever had, even that young officer back East, who had left her to marry his major's daughter. *That* was what had turned her against the army, she thought with wry frankness. That was why she had snubbed Lieutenant Aydelott at every opportunity. Until now he ignored her entirely, for which no one could blame him.

She glanced up at Dean Hoadley as they walked toward the cluster of buildings and ranked wagons. His profile was like something chiseled out of hard, dark stone. At times she sensed a ruthless, selfish streak in him, although he had always been gentlemanly and considerate with her, and it frightened her vaguely. Mary Ellen Carey quickened her step to keep pace with Hoadley's long, swinging stride.

CHAPTER TWO

Desert Trek

PARK AYDELOTT and Jim Carey, clean-scrubbed and damp-haired, were having a drink at the crowded bar in a front corner of the large main room of Lockett's establishment. Some of the pioneers were already eating at the long tables in the rear, served by a seemingly endless procession of Lockett's plump, jovial daughters. Others were preparing their own meals over fires outside. Otis himself was still administering to the wounded in the bunkhouse, while the able enlisted men cared for the horses or washed off the grime of battle, splashing luxuriously in Bitterroot Creek.

Emerging from the ladies' washroom, Mary Ellen went straight to her father. Her bronze hair glinted golden in the lamplight as she walked, and her eyes were blue and brilliant in the fine tanned face, her body lithe and firmly rounded in the gray homespun dress. She hesitated an instant, on seeing Aydelott there, but forced herself onward, thankful that Hoadley was still outside cleaning up.

"Lieutenant Aydelott has been trying to recruit some nurses," Jim Carey said. "Without much success, I fear."

Aydelott bowed slightly, silently, his face a serene bronzed mask, his gray eyes as cool and reserved as his manner.

"I—I'll be glad to do anything I can to help," Mary Ellen said quickly, surprising herself somewhat.

If Aydelott was astonished he concealed it. "Mrs. Lockett and her Mexican could use some help, Miss Carey."

Jim Carey's hollow-cheeked face brightened immeasurably. "That's fine, Mary Ellen. The least we can do is help out with the wounded."

"Where are—where do I go, please?" she asked awkwardly.

"I'll show you, if you don't mind," Aydelott said, extending his arm with easy grace.

"Thank you." She took his arm and they started for the door, just as Dean Hoadley entered. He stopped before them in amazement, his face turning ugly with anger.

"What's this?" he demanded. "Where you going, Mary?"

"To help with the wounded," she told him.

"No, you aren't," Hoadley said hoarsely. "You're having supper with me, Mary."

"Wait a minute, Dean," put in Jim Carey coldly. "That isn't for you to say."

Hoadley glared from him to Aydelott. "I'm not taking orders from the army, and neither is Mary. Not for a—"

"Nobody is ordering her," interposed Aydelott mildly.

"That's right, Dean," said Mary Ellen. "I volunteered. I want to go, and I'm going. Please don't make a stupid scene about it."

Veins stood out in a V on Hoadley's forehead. "You're staying with me!" he rasped.

"Hoadley! You're out of line!" Jim

Carey spoke sharply. "Better watch it!"

"You heard what Miss Carey said," Aydelott reminded quietly. "Stand aside now, mister!"

"You don't rank me, shavetail!" snarled Hoadley. "I'll break your—"

Thrusting suddenly forward, Aydelott shouldered the larger man out of the way and propelled Mary Ellen gently to the door. Hoadley lunged furiously at the officer, but Sergeant Tidmore suddenly swung in through the doorway and stood broad and solid between them. A Colt revolver was in hand, and his jaws were moving rhythmically on his tobacco.

"Back off, buster," Tidmore said. "You been wantin' trouble since Camp Grant. You're liable to get a bellyful anytime now."

"I'll attend to this when I get back, Sergeant," said Aydelott, and went outside with the girl.

Hoadley fell back slowly, eyeing the gun in Tidmore's steady hand. His mouth was working, his black eyes glinting with rage and hate. "Holster that iron, soldier, and we'll start even," he panted.

"I hired out to kill Indians, not swine like you," Walt Tidmore said with calm contempt. "But keep askin' for it, and I'll oblige you, mister."

HOADLEY looked around the tense, crowded room, and Fresno Wales and Chip Gowie pushed through to stand on either side of him.

"Want us to burn that bucko down, boss?" asked Wales in a nasal drawl.

"Not burnin'," invited Tidmore. "I'll take at least two of you along with me."

"Break this up, Hoadley," said Jim Carey in disgust. "What kind of a wagon boss are you, man?"

He moved out beside the sergeant, and lanky blond Private Jerry Pryor took a stand at Tidmore's other shoulder, grinning a gay, boyish grin. Now there were three aligned on either side, although Tidmore's drawn Colt forestalled any hostile movement.

"Come on, civilians, open the ball," Private Pryor suggested. "You fight here like you fight on the road, huh?"

"Shut up, Jerry," said Sergeant Tidmore. "There ain't goin' to be any fightin'. You men get along to the mess hall now." He waved his gun casually at the three leaders of the wagon train.

"There'll be more to this, soldier," warned Dean Hoadley.

Jerry Pryor laughed. "Sure, you can shoot us in the back when we're fightin' Apaches tomorrow!"

"Maybe you'd like to step outdoors, sonny?" Chip Gowie said.

"Kinda tired from killin' Injuns all day," grinned Pryor. "But if you insist, Frogface—"

"Knock it off, Jerry," said Tidmore wearily. "You three drift along before I get sick enough of you to start shootin'."

Hoadley gestured broadly. "Come on, boys. They got the drop—this time." He swaggered toward the front door, Wales and Gowie after him, but Sergeant Tidmore halted them with his Colt cocked.

"Not that way. Back to a table and put on the feedbag. We only got one lieutenant, and we figure on keepin' him."

"Brave soldiers!" jeered little Fresno Wales.

"What I call real brave," Pryor said, "is ridin' in front of a string of wagons when all the Apaches in Madrill Basin are *behind* the train!"

Hoadley tramped back to a table and hammered for service, the other two trailing him. Walt Tidmore shifted his chew and spoke to Private Pryor:

"Bein' fond of bars, I'll hang around this one awhile, Jerry. You go get the lieutenant and some of the boys that like to fight day *and* night."

"I'd like to buy you a drink, Sergeant," said Jim Carey. "I'm really ashamed—for all of us."

"No call for that, Mr. Carey. There's rotten apples in every barrel. But I'll be happy to join you in a drink . . ."

Hours later, Mary Ellen Carey stumbled out of the bunkhouse and headed for her bed in the wagon. She was spent and sick from the sights and sounds of suffering, the smell of blood and death. She felt that she had changed, become a woman there at Lockett's Stockade. The carefree, self-centered girl was gone.

The post seemed to be slumbering, except for the army sentries and a few night-hawking Lockett employees. She wondered if Hoadley and Aydelott had fought—and she no longer hoped for Hoadley to humiliate the young officer. Park Aydelott had been so pleasant and charming tonight, so gracious and refined, that he made Dean seem like a loutish oaf, a half-civilized giant of a barbarian. And the lieutenant who had jilted her back East was a callow adolescent in comparison to Aydelott.

The sound of familiar voices stopped her at the dark corner of a shed. Pausing in the shadows, she peered around the edge. Hoadley and Aydelott stood facing one another in the pale moonlight of an areaway between two out-buildings. Dean loomed huge and powerful before the slender lieutenant. She noted with relief that Hoadley wore no gunbelt, and that Aydelott's Colt was strapped to his side as usual.

"Just us two, man to man," Hoadley was saying. "I left my gun off. Drop your belt and we'll have it out, soldier, fair and square."

"I've done my fighting for the day," Aydelott said. "There'll be more of it tomorrow, and all the days between here and Shelley. I can't accommodate you, mister. Not at this time."

Hoadley laughed scornfully. "You're crawling, boy. I thought you wouldn't like it, with the odds even and no troopers at your back."

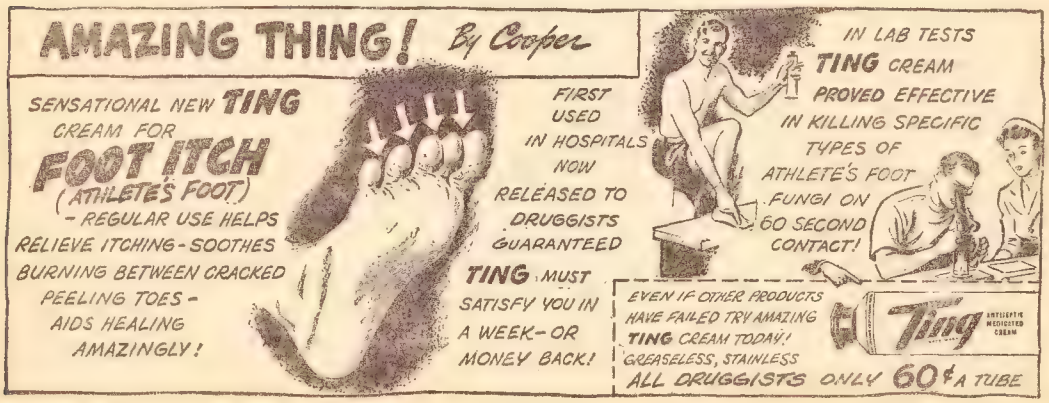
"The odds have nothing to do with it. I'll meet you any way you want, when we reach the fort. But I'm the only officer with this detail, Hoadley. My first obligation is to the men in my command."

"Aa-aww, you're plain yellow, soldier!" scoffed Hoadley. "You aren't that important to the cavalry. I'll bet your sergeant is a better officer than you are, Aydelott!"

"In some ways, he is," Aydelott agreed. "Tidmore's a fine noncom. But he's never had full responsibility, and he doesn't want it. K Company relies on me, regardless of your opinion. I can't risk getting hurt in a senseless brawl."

Hoadley's mocking laughter echoed from the walls. "You're some hero, soldier! Just about what I expected from a fancy-pants dude like you."

"When we're safe in Fort Shelley, I'll give you satisfaction," Aydelott promised quietly. "That's all for now, mister. Get on to your sleeping quarters. You've wasted enough of my time."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Dean Hoadley nodded at the gun in the army holster, spread his enormous hands, shrugged and wheeled away with a swagger, laughing disdainfully as he went. Mary Ellen waited until Aydelott had gone too, slim and silent into the night. Then she went wearily on toward the Carey Conestoga.

Common sense told her that Aydelott had been absolutely right, yet she was somehow disappointed in him. There was something smug and stuffy about his attitude—something too noble and perfect to be authentic, she thought. He was too consciously righteous.

In that showdown, Mary Ellen had to confess that she preferred big Dean Hoadley, in spite of his rather crude taunts and jibes. Hoadley was rough, headstrong, wild and primitive—but he was all man.

Her first impressions had been correct. Dean was the one for her. Perhaps she wasn't quite well bred enough to appreciate Park Aydelott. But the reason didn't matter . . . Remembering the pressure of Hoadley's arms and lips, Mary Ellen smiled up at the sparkling stars over the southerly Shangree Hills.

THE Apaches would not attack the stockade, for Otis Lockett was an old friend of Cochise. Some said they were blood-brothers. It was one of the mysteries of the Madrill country. Whatever the truth was, it made Lockett's a safe refuge. The wounded and a few emigrant women and children were left behind there when the wagons rolled on westward.

Park Aydelott told Mary Ellen what he knew of the Cochise-Lockett legend the first night out. It had been an easy day. The Indians had dropped back, and there was a relaxed air in the camp. The girl listened with polite interest, aware as usual of the lieutenant's charm, but somehow she couldn't wholly respect him. She was glad when Dean Hoadley arrived, and Aydelott took his leave soon afterward.

"Is he afraid of you, Dean?" she asked innocently.

The big man laughed. "I don't know, Mary. I guess he figures I could handle him, if I had to."

"Are you so sure?"

"To be any good a man's got to be sure." Hoadley reached for her in the shadow of the wagon. "Let's not waste time talkin' about *him*."

Mary Ellen felt herself drawn irresistibly, even before his arms closed around her. She couldn't keep her own arms from clinging to his solid frame, her lips from yearning up to meet his mouth. The full, upsurging tide within her told her this was right and good. Dean Hoadley was her man.

He didn't need Aydelott's poise and polish. Hoadley had something better, deeper and stronger. They would be married at Fort Shelley, whether or not her father approved. She hated to hurt Jim Carey, but a girl has the right to the man of her choice. . . .

The Yoder Desert lay burning before them, and still the Apaches were hanging back for some reason. Perhaps to let the blistering heat and blinding glare and scorching sands take their toll from the caravan. Possibly to wait for the difficult Cordovan crossing before they struck. Sporadic outbreaks of fighting occurred briefly on the rear flanks, but Jim Carey said this was young bucks letting off steam more than anything else. Even so, there was no letdown or rest for Aydelott and his troopers. Ceaseless vigilance had to be maintained all day long from pre-dawn to full darkness.

The train crawled on through creosote brush, prickly pear and bladed yucca. Mary Ellen Carey had never suffered from such heat. Jim pointed out to her the catclaw, mescal and Spanish bayonet, the spiny-wanded clusters of ocitollo and spreading candelabra of saguare cacti. There was a fantastic beauty about this flaming waste-

land with its weird vegetation and rock monuments, but the slow agony of traveling in heat and dust made appreciation impossible. People cursed the desert instead of praising it.

"Only a thin strip of the Yoder here," Jim Carey told his daughter consolingly. "Another day now and we'll be out of it for good and coming into the Cordovan Valley."

It was that last day on the western fringe of the desert when sickness broke out in the wagon of the Porter family. Fear of an epidemic swept the column like a prairie fire. Dean Hoadley ordered the Porters to pull out and travel at a safe parallel course. Nobody was to go near the stricken family. When Porter and some of his friends started to protest, Fresno Wales and Chip Gowie appeared at once to silence them, hands hanging suggestively near gun-butts, eyes cold and merciless.

"We've got to have order," Dean Hoadley explained easily. "The Porters will be all right. The trail is plenty wide, and the army's out there between them and the Indians."

It seemed heartless to Mary Ellen, but she supposed it was an essential move. Dean had bossed enough trains to know what was best. There was no point in endangering the whole outfit. And still, it didn't seem quite fair.

Her father said: "Could at least try to find out what's wrong with them, help them as much as possible. Probably nothing contagious at all."

"They've got fever and they've all broken out." Mary Ellen hastened automatically to Hoadley's defense.

"That doesn't necessarily mean smallpox."

"I'm sure Dean knows what he's doing, Dad!"

"I wonder," Jim Carey said dryly, as the drumfire of guns rolled up from the rear. "All we need now is the Apaches closing in."

CHAPTER THREE

Hang on to Your Man

LATE that afternoon they left the smoking sands of the Yoder behind, and wheeled on into the marginal plains of the Cordovan. The country was still semi-arid for a stretch, but to the burnt-out, sun-dazed emigrants it was a veritable garden land.

Lumbering off; to the left of the column, lonely and tragic-looking, was the exiled wagon with old Porter sagging on the seat, too ill to be up but still trying to drive. From time to time Mary Ellen's eyes strayed pityingly in that direction. The mother and three children were bedded down in the hooded rear, and at intervals the stirring air brought thin cries and moans across to the main line. Porter's feeble efforts were enough to tear the heart, without those faint sounds of suffering from his tortured family.

Several men, in defiance of Hoadley's command, set out toward the lone vehicle, but Wales and Gowie intercepted them, this time with drawn guns. And Hoadley said: "It's for you own good, your families' good. We can't sacrifice the whole train for one family."

When they formed the ring to camp that evening, the Porter wagon, a hundred yards to the south, looked more desolate and abandoned than ever. Jim Carey said it was plain murder.

Mary Ellen sought Dean Hoadley at once. "You *can't* leave them out there alone, Dean!"

"Got to, Mary. It's the only thing to do. Smallpox'd wipe us all out."

"But you aren't sure it's smallpox."

"I've seen it before. Nothing else breaks out like that."

Mary Ellen shook her bronze head. "Let somebody go to them, then."

"That'd spread it just as quick," Hoadley said. "No, Mary Ellen, the Porters are

done, dead already. No point in killing anybody else."

Park Aydelott rode up from the rear to discover the reason for the isolated wagon, and Dean Hoadley told him bluntly and concisely.

"I doubt if it's smallpox," the officer said. "At any rate, they can't stay out there. The Apaches are closer than they have been in days." He dismounted to face the wagon boss on foot.

"Apaches don't fight at night."

"They'd pick off a lone wagon like that though. You'll have to bring it in, Hoadley."

"Listen, soldier, I'm runnin' this wagon train. You tend to fightin' Indians!" Hoadley was in a towering black rage.

"In a case of emergency my authority exceeds yours," Aydelott said calmly.

"Don't try to make that stick in this case!" snarled Hoadley.

Aydelott was silent, and Mary Ellen thought he was going to back down again. Tension filled the circle in the lavender twilight. The emigrants were watching anxiously and with varied emotions. Fresno Wales and Chip Gowie had moved beside Hoadley. Even though Aydelott represented the U. S. Army, Mary Ellen felt certain those men would kill him if they had to. Alone against the three, the lieutenant had not the slightest chance. She shuddered at the naked evil of Wales and Gowie, and searched instinctively for more blue uniforms. But the troops were busy bivouacking for the night.

"I'll go out and have a look at the Porters," decided Aydelott.

"You're a doctor too?" jeered Hoadley. "Go out there, soldier, and you don't come back to this camp!"

Without further words, Aydelott stepped into the saddle and swung toward the lone wagon. Exhaling sharply, Dean Hoadley drew and lined his gun on that straight slender back, but Mary Ellen landed on that brawny arm with amazing speed and strength, bearing it earthward. Cursing viciously, Hoadley flung her off with such violence that she fell rolling in the dirt. He was raising the gun once more when Jim Carey's voice halted him:

"Far enough, Hoadley! Too far, in fact." The old man was standing there with a Sharps trained firmly. "Drop that gun!"

Hoadley gaped in astonishment and let his weapon fall. Wales and Gowie were also staring incredulously.

"This old jasper must be sick of livin'," Wales drawled in his nasal twang, while Gowie spat contemptuously in Carey's direction. They were both estimating their chances of drawing against that Sharps.

"Try it, boys," invited Jim Carey. "Give it a whirl."

Shaken and half-stunned, shocked by Dean Hoadley's treatment of her, Mary Ellen saw two soldiers threading through the crowd and sighed with deep thanksgiving as she scrambled upright. Sergeant Walt Tidmore and Private Jerry Pryor ranged alongside of old Jim Carey.

"Nice work, Pop," grinned the boyish blond Pryor. "All you need's our moral support maybe."

Tidmore, jaws munching his chew, eyed the three men icily. "These hounds been bayin' for army blood ever since we left Grant. And now they're knockin' young ladies around."

Wales and Gowie glanced questioningly at their chief, but Hoadley only gestured impatiently and moved tentatively toward Mary Ellen. "I'm sorry, Mary. I didn't know what I was doing."

She shrank back beside her father and the soldiers, shaking her head in dismay, and Jim Carey said: "Touch her again, just so much as a finger, and you'll die, Dean!"

"But I didn't know who was on me! I'd never harm Mary Ellen."

"Shut up," Sergeant Tidmore told him, and spat explosively for emphasis.

Lieutenant Aydelott rode back into the enclosure, the crowd making way for his horse, and reined up before the tableau at the center. "It isn't smallpox," he said wearily. "But they'll need someone to take care of them."

Mary Ellen stepped instantly forward. "I'll go, Park."

Hoadley's bulk lurched in protest, but Jim Carey's rifle rooted him back in his tracks. "What is it then?" he demanded, bull-throated.

"Measles, I think. There was a case or two at Lockett's."

A hoarse murmur swept the gathering, as the full atrocity of the situation struck the pioneers.

"How was I to know that?" cried Hoadley, desperately appealing as he felt the turn of the tide against him.

"You should have made sure before you acted," Aydelott said, and then to his own men: "Lift the lady up here, Walt, and watch things while I'm gone. Pryor, come along with us to bring that wagon in. The Apaches seem to be closer than ever in the south."

DUSK was deepening into darkness when they left the encampment, and the early stars were twinkling out above jagged Cathedral Towers in the far south. Perched sidewise in front of Aydelott, his arm light but secure across her shoulders, Mary Ellen was intensely aware of his lithe nearness. The lanky, loose-jointed Pryor, carbine under arm, sauntered beside them whistling a frivolous tune.

"We could have walked, of course," the lieutenant said. "Guess I've grown fast to this saddle."

"I like this," she told him. "Fun, after that wagon seat . . . How are the Porters?"

"Sicker than they should be. But they'll be all right. It's good of you to come, Mary Ellen."

"I wanted to," the girl said simply, thrilling to his casual touch, and wishing they had more than a hundred yards to go. She regretted ever having rebuffed and maltreated this fine young officer. She had done so partly, at least, she realized now, because she was secretly attracted to his clean boyish beauty . . . *Yes,* she thought, *the word is beauty, in a keen masculine sense.*

Approximately halfway there was a shallow dry wash, and as the horse dipped into this Mary Ellen leaned to keep her balance, back until she was resting tremulously across Aydelott's chest with the fragrance of her hair in his face. But he did not kiss her, and when the surge of the gelding up the other bank threw her hard against the man, he still didn't kiss her. Instead, he was speaking aside and down to Pryor: "Do you hear something out there, Jerry?"

Pausing on the southern brink of the boulder-cluttered arroyo, they strained eyes and ears toward their objective. Beyond the Porter wagon the terrain dropped in sudden but gradual descent. Nothing could be seen or heard except the sobbing of children ahead, the sounds of the camp behind.

They went on warily in the darkness, and Mary Ellen could sense the unseen menace that alerted the two soldiers. She was thankful now that the distance was no greater. She wanted to nestle back on Aydelott's shoulder, but she knew he had forgotten her presence, except as an additional burden, and was no doubt wishing he had left her behind.

They were almost there, the outline of the canvas-hooded vehicle looming plainly, when it happened with blood-freezing abruptness. The horse snorted and shied, Jerry Pryor swore despairingly, and before their horrified eyes the Porter wagon overturned with a rending crash, as if tipped by some unearthly power. Hideous screams tore the night, mingling and rising unbearably, and flames leaped up almost instantly. Over it all rose the wild and terrible war cries of Apache warriors, slashing, hacking, swarming over the wreckage.

Pryor's carbine was hammering, and Ay-

delott's pistol blasted deafeningly past Mary Ellen's ear. But it was futile and far too late for the Porter family. The slaughter was over in a few minutes. The screaming cut short, and the bright blaze varnished the daubed maniac-faces of the shrieking braves. Already the air swished with arrows, thrown lances, and whined with the passage of lead.

"Run for it, Jerry!" yelled Park Aydelott, wheeling his mount. "Catch hold here, man!"

But Jerry Pryor only grinned, waved them carelessly away, and went on slamming his shots into that wolf-pack of Indians. Groaning in helpless agony and grief, Aydelott booted his mount into a gallop, clinging to the girl in front of him, driving for the shelter of that gully halfway to the camp, leaving Pryor behind because there was nothing else to do in the circumstances.

Nearly on the edge of the depression the horse heaved with an audible impact, lurched crazily and floundered beneath them. Aydelott flung Mary Ellen clear. Then the earth smashed up to her, beating the breath from her body, the light from her eyes.

Kicking out of the stirrups, Aydelott followed her to the ground, snatching his carbine free at the last split second, rolling loosely in the dust. Coming quickly to his feet, Aydelott hauled the unconscious girl over the rim into the wash, and turned to do what he could for Private Pryor.

His carbine emptied, Jerry was coming on the run now, lank and long-legged with the bullets and arrows whistling all about him. Park Aydelott knelt at the top of the arroyo and poured his rifle fire back to cover Jerry. Men were rushing out from the wagon ring now, but not in time for Jerry Pryor, perhaps not in time for all of them.

Mary Ellen Carey came to her senses lying flat on the bottom of the gully, feeling bruised and broken and sick. Her dazed eyes focused by chance on the kneeling figure of Park Aydelott up on the rim against the starry sky. Without thinking or hesitating, she began to crawl painfully up the bank, wanting only to be at his side, caring for nothing else. Out for only seconds, she reached the top before Pryor got there. Swiftly she clawed the Colt revolver out of Park's holster.

"Get down, get down!" Aydelott shouted. "I need that gun—the carbine's empty."

"Reload then," she panted. "I can—use this."

Park Aydelott smiled and reloaded swiftly, while Mary Ellen opened up with the six-shooter. Then they were firing together. Pryor was within ten yards of cover when the bullet struck him. He staggered forward a few steps and slumped to his knees, shaking his blond head in disgust, smiling dimly at them, and falling on his face. Aydelott went out and dragged him in, pushing Mary Ellen out of the way as he and his burden slid into the wash together.

Jerry Pryor's smile was bright, bloody, brief. "How's that—for—rear-guard action?" he said, and died in Aydelott's arms.

The counter-attack from the camp swept past them, and this time there were homespun-clad emigrants out fighting with the blue-uniformed men of K Company. The Apaches were soon in flight—those that weren't dead around the massacred burning wagon—and it was all over.

ON THE bank of the arroyo, Mary Ellen Carey and Park Aydelott were stretched side by side, exhausted and powder-blackened, their bitterness assuaged only by this new wonder that had come into their lives, in the midst of strife and carnage.

"See, Mary Ellen?" the officer said slowly. "Your people fighting beside my men—at last."

"Thanks to you, Park."

"And to you even more."

"And the poor Porters," she whispered, shuddering. "And Jerry Pryor."

"It doesn't matter who brought it about, it's a fine thing," Park Aydelott said. "This column will be all right now. We'll cross the Cordovan and make Fort Shelley."

"And when we get there, Park?"

He smiled tenderly at her. "There's a chaplain at Shelley, I understand. And I have a ninety-day furlough coming up."

As their exhaustion passed, their awareness of one another grew until it obliterated everything, both living and dead. What they had found was meant to transcend all other things. The mere clasp of their hands seemed enough, until Mary Ellen leaned toward him and said: "Well, Park, if you're never going to kiss me . . ." And pressed her ripe-sweet mouth onto the firmness of his.

Then Aydelott's arms went around her as his mouth responded, and there was as much strength in his leanness as there ever had been in Hoadley's bulk. And a great deal more meaning, a richer and purer fire, one that would endure.

Dad'll be glad, she thought. *He knew all the time, and I should have. I did know, but I just wouldn't admit it.*

They were still there when the others came back from routing the redskins. Both the army and the pioneers seemed pleased. It had long been whispered in the ranks and the wagons that these two belonged together. . . . But Park Aydelott was alert once more, watching for Hoadley as he reloaded the carbine and revolver, knowing that the big man would never accept this.

Walking back toward the circle of wagons, Mary Ellen sensed his withdrawal and knew the reason for it. "Do you have to fight any more, Park?"

"I have to be ready," he said quietly.

Inside the enclosure, Dean Hoadley came at them in the sudden charge of a monstrous raging bull, forgetting the gun on his hip, lusting only to get his bare hands on Aydelott and tear him to pieces. Park pushed Mary Ellen aside, dropped the carbine, and waited in an easy, balanced crouch. At precisely the right instant, Park Aydelott went in to meet him, flashing inside those mighty grappling arms, smashing his fists straight into that distorted face. The curly black head went unhinged as Hoadley rocked back on his heels, gasping and tottering but not going down.

(Please continue on page 113)

The Romantic Heart

By Val Newell

Celie was immature and unsophisticated. That's why she promised to marry Nicky, who was handsome and romantic. Actually Celie had never been sure of love until Mark Connell claimed her mouth with a bitter kiss. Then she gave her whole heart—gave it to a man who sardonically laughed at the word "love"—gave it, and got in return the maturity that goes with tears . . . the wisdom that comes with pain.

It's Val Newell's moving story about a girl who walked into heartbreak and out again. We are proud to present it as our lead novelette for October ROMANCE.

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Pen Pards

WELCOME once again to the Pen Pards corral. This crisp autumn weather ought to be getting in the bones of all you letter-wranglers, pepping you up and making you want to get yourselves a whole passel of new friends. This is just the place where you can find out how to do it, because we're giving you below a list of eager pen pals. Make a grab for your pen right now, and don't stop writing till you've contacted every one you think would make a good correspondent.

Life-Saving Lassie

Dear Editor,

I am an 18-year-old girl who would like to hear from pen pals all over the world. I am 5 ft. 4½ in. tall, 135 lbs. I have blue eyes and reddish-brown hair.

Any kind of sport finds favor with me, but at swimming I really shine. I have my junior life-saving badge. I would like to hear from boys and girls ranging in age from 18 to 70.

MICKEY SNYDER
624 S. Main St.
Pittsburgh 20, Pa.

Calling All Twins

Dear Editor,

Here's a letter from a gal who would like to get letters from boys and girls, aged 17 to 21, especially girls who will soon become student nurses and people who have a twin.

I am 18 years old, weigh 108 lbs., and stand 5 ft. 4½ in. high, have brown eyes and short, naturally curly brown hair. Other vital points about me include hobbies of reading, singing hillbilly songs and hiking. In the line of music, a march always rates my applause.

Baseball is my favorite sport, although I like other sports, too. I promise to answer all letters and will exchange snapshots.

MARY SUE DUNN
Gibsonville, N. C.

Romantic Rebecca

Dear Editor,

Here's a preacher's daughter, 17 years old. I have green eyes and golden-brown hair. I stand 5 ft. 3 in. tall and weigh 130 lbs.

My main interest is reading books. I love to study psychology. Hiking, swimming and bike riding are also fun.

Even though I have never ridden a horse and know little about the West, I would like to write to a cowboy. My only knowledge of such interesting characters has come from books and I'm sure a real one could confirm my romantic beliefs. I would also like to write to some lonely bookworms.

REBECCA RODEN
Route 2
Dorset, Ohio

Donna Takes a Dare

Dear Editor,

I am a northern Michigan girl who would like to have pen pards. My age is 13 years, my hair light brown, my eyes gray-green. I stand 5 ft. 4 in. tall and weigh 115 lbs.

My hobbies are collecting dog statues, reading war and aviation stories, dancing and swimming. My favorite sport is basketball.

Anybody is welcome in my mailbox, but I would especially like to hear from boys and girls from 13 through 16. I have a bet with one of my friends that I'll get an answer to my plea, so please help me to win it.

DONNA WALSH
806 Minneapolis St.
Sault Ste. Marie, Mich.

Brown-Eyed Wilma

Dear Editor,

Right now I'm living in the bush country, where my husband is a Prod. foreman for a pulp and paper company. I find it very lonely at times and would like to strike up a few letter-friendships with people all over the world, anyone who cares to write.

I am 30 years old and have one child. I stand 5 ft. 5½ in. tall and weigh 128 lbs. My hair is light brown and my eyes are brown. I love almost any kind of outdoor sport and I do a lot of fancy work.

So I would enjoy hearing from you pen pals

and promise to answer all and to exchange snapshots.

MRS. WILMA BOSVIK
Camp 105
Stevens, Ontario
Canada

Young Newfoundlander

Dear Editor,

Is there any chance of a Newfoundlander joining your Pen Pards? I am 17 years old, have brown hair, brown eyes, weigh 135 lbs., and stand 5 ft., 6 in. tall.

Western pictures are one thing I love and I would like to live on a ranch. I also enjoy knitting, dancing and swimming. It would be nice to hear from some cowboys from 17 to 24 and from any other boys and girls who would be interested in writing me. Will do my best to answer all letters.

MARGUERITE B. HOLLETT
P. O. Box 98
Burin, Newfoundland

Button, Button . . .

Dear Editor,

I am a 13-year-old farm girl who would like to receive letters from anyone, anywhere. I am 5 ft. tall, weigh 102 lbs., have red hair and blue eyes. My hobbies are collecting different kinds of buttons, writing, and receiving letters and reading comics.

Basketball and softball I find fairly interesting, too. I promise to answer every letter I receive, no matter how old or young you are. I'll exchange snapshots with the first three who write.

VERLEY BLEVIN
Star Route
Vian, Okla.

Indiana Hombre

Dear Editor,

This is my first plea for pen pals. I would like to join your club. I am a 16-year-old Frankfort, Indiana, boy who would like very much to hear from both boys and girls my age or older. I am 5 ft. 7 in. tall, weigh 138 lbs., have blond hair and blue eyes behind glasses.

My hobbies are writing to pen pals, collecting stamps and pictures, and all outdoor sports. I'm working right now for a trucking company. So, come on, boys and girls, fill my mail box, please.

ROBERT (BUTCH) SHAW
52 Clinton Ave.
Frankfort, Ind.

Saskatchewan Sage Hen

Dear Editor,

Please print my plea for pen pards in your magazine. I am 5 ft. 4 in. tall and carry a quite nicely placed 115 lbs. on my slender—not too slender—body. I have brown hair and blue eyes.

I love all sports, especially horseback riding and dancing. I live on a small farm and it's pretty lonesome most of the time, so come on and write to a farm lassie. I want especially to hear from cowboys, cowgirls, servicemen and anyone who lives on a ranch, but, of course, all are welcome. I really want to make friends.

CLARA CHASE
Connell Creek, Saskatchewan
Canada

Rambunctious Ruby

Dear Editor,

I would like to introduce myself. I am 17 years old, have long, blonde hair and blue eyes, stand 5 ft. 4 in. in height and weigh 118 lbs. I like all kinds of sports.

Listening to the radio is one of my hobbies and I like to go to shows, but most of all I like to write letters and receive them.

RUBY JEAN TAUNTON
302 10th Ave.
Alexander City, Ala.

Man From Menominee

Dear Editor,

Is there a small space in the corner of your Pen Pards column for a Michigan guy? I am 6 ft. tall, weigh about 160 lbs., have brown hair and blue eyes and am single.

Football is my favorite sport, but I like them all. Also like dancing. Won't someone give a guy a break?

GEORGE W. KRAMER
608 13th Ave.
Menominee, Mich.

Rodeo Queen

Dear Editor,

Here's a 23-year-old gal who lives with her parents and works in town. I'm 5 ft. 4 in. tall and have brown hair and hazel eyes. My hobby is collecting horse statues, of which I have quite a few.

I was queen of the Boulder County Fair and Rodeo this year. I like rodeos very much. I own my own horse, so you can see that I like to ride a lot. I also like dancing and swimming.

Won't you boys and girls from every state write me? I will trade snapshots with everyone who wishes.

ANNABELL BELVILL
Route 3, Box 12
Longmont, Colo.

Dairy State Delores

Dear Editor,

I'm writing in hopes that you will print my plea for pen pals. I love to write letters and to receive them from friends all over the world.

My age is 19 years, I stand 5 ft. 6 in. tall and weigh 119 lbs. I have brown hair and blue eyes. My hobby is collecting things—postcards, souvenirs, snaps and Western and hillbilly records. I like movies, music, horses, hiking, dancing once in a while and almost anything that's fun.

So, please, everyone, fill my mailbox and you'll all get answers. Those who send pictures will receive an answer first.

DELORES NELSON
Route 4
Rice Lake, Wis.

Lively Lillian

Dear Editor,

I have been on the prowl for someone to palaver with for a long time, so here's my bid for pen pals.

My home is on a farm. I'm 17 years old, have dark-brown hair, gray-green eyes, stand 5 ft. 2 in. tall, weigh 117 lbs. and have a good sense of humor to go with it all. I like horseback riding, singing, drawing and all outdoor sports.

Anybody between the ages of 16 and 24 in Canada, Hawaii and the U.S.A. is especially welcome and doubly so if he or she is interested in trading Western, hillbilly and folk songs. I'll also trade snaps. So, come on, everybody, fill my mail box. All letters are welcome.

LILLIAN FELDBERG
Wetaskiwin, Alberta
Canada

Beers on Tap

Dear Editor,

Here's an 18-year-old guy who'd like to have some pen pals. I stand 5 ft. 11 in. tall and weigh 167 lbs. My hair is brown and so are my eyes and my hobbies include collecting pictures of pen pals from different towns. I would like to hear from anyone from 6 to 60.

ROBERT BEERS
Route 2
New Brighton, Pa.

Patricia on Parade

Dear Editor,

I am a full-fledged eastern gal who likes to hear all about the West, so I'm writing to try and get some pen pals to tell me all about it. I am 16 years old, 5 ft. 6 in. tall, have light-brown hair, dark-brown eyes and I love all sports, but prefer hiking.

My collections are of all sorts of things and I read all the time. I walk to the post office every day and hope that from now on I'll have a large pile of letters.

PATRICIA LEE CRANE
Bell Ave.
Claysville, Pa.

Donald's Disposition

Dear Editor,

My name is Donald E. Johnson. I am 22 years old, stand 5 ft. 8½ in. tall, weigh 156 lbs., have wavy black hair, hazel eyes and a good disposition. I would like to get some pen pals.

I like all sports and enjoy shows, dancing, picnics and riding. I'll answer all letters from anyone 17 years on up and from every state or country. If anyone would like to write to a lonesome lobo, I'll be waiting.

DONALD E. JOHNSON
c/o Post Office
Graniteville, Mo.

Iris From Indiana

Dear Editor,

Would it be possible for a gal like me to get her first plea in Pen Pards? I am 15 years old, 5 ft. 2½ in. tall, with coppery-red, naturally curly hair and green eyes. I weigh 109 lbs. and have a fair complexion.

I love almost all sports, indoors and out, including swimming and riding. My hobbies are reading, music and corresponding with people. I would like to have pen pals from Western states and any other state or foreign country.

IRIS COVAULT
Marshall, Ind.

Northland Gal

Dear Editor,

I would like very much to have my letter printed in Pen Pards. I am 15 years old, have brown hair and green eyes. I stand 5 ft. 2 in. tall and I'm a sophomore at high school.

My hobbies are reading Zane Grey's books and collecting pictures of Western stars. I like ice-skating and horseback riding. I live on a little farm in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, where it gets pretty darn cold in winter.

Would boys and girls from all over the U.S.—especially the Western part—between the ages of 15 and 19, please write to me?

HELEN HALLSTROM
Chatham, Mich.

Texas-bound Pennsylvanian

Dear Editor,

I've been privileged to be able to read and enjoy your swell publication and also—through the pen-pal pages—to strike up a few good pals. I would appreciate having my letter published before I ship out, but I guess it isn't always possible.

My age is 19 years. I stand 6 ft. tall and have dark-brown hair and eyes. I participate in three sports—softball, football and basketball—and enjoy hiking through the forestlands of my native Pennsylvania.

Come on, you gals and guys, and drop an airman a line or two.

Pfc. EDWARD D. KRNYWICH
3750 Supply Sqdn.
Sheppard A.F.B.
W. Falls, Tex.

Little Farmer Annie

Dear Editor,

Please find room for me. I'm not very big and won't take up too much space. I'm 14 years old, 5 ft. 3½ in. tall, have brown hair and brown eyes. I live on a farm near a small town.

My hobbies are collecting pictures of movie stars, ice-skating, swimming and writing letters. I promise to swap snapshots. I would like pen pals from the United States and other parts of the world, too.

ANNIE OSZUST
Glendon, Alberta
Canada

Midwest Miss

Dear Editor,

I've read lots of the letters in your magazine and, since I like to write letters, I've decided to try my luck and see if I can't have a letter printed, too. I go to school here in Hazel Green

and I like to sew, crochet and cook and I love all sports.

My hobbies are collecting anything—even feathers and charms—anything. I have short, reddish-brown hair, brown eyes, stand 5 ft. 2 in. tall, weigh 101 lbs. and am 16 years old. I hope lots of kids will write to me.

KATHLEEN HIRST
Hazel Green, Wis.

Many Talents

Dear Editor,

Have enjoyed your magazine very much and would like to join your pen pal club. I am 27, 5 ft. 8 in. tall, weigh about 150 lbs. and have brown hair and blue eyes.

I have traveled considerably and have had a number of different jobs, such as country-club steward, truck driver, short order cook, machine operator and mechanic. I would like to hear from people 20 to 35 and I will answer all letters promptly and send pictures to all.

TIMOTHY COLLINS
2508 Avenue W.
Snyder, Tex.

Take A Chance On Charlotte

Dear Editor,

This is my first attempt to get in on your swell Pen Pards corral. Hope I'm successful. I am 20 years old, weigh 120 lbs. and stand 5 ft. 3½ in. tall. I have dark, naturally curly, auburn hair, hazel eyes and no freckles.

I like most sports and have several hobbies, the latest being that of tinting photographs.

Have you ever taken a chance on something? If so, why not take one on me? You have nothing to lose, for I surely will try to answer all those who write.

CHARLOTTE SCHULTZ
Route 2, Box 103-B
Jacksonville, Ore.

Prospective Prospector

Dear Editor,

I am an Arizonan and spend about three months a year on the desert. I'm 29 years old, blond and blue-eyed, standing 5 ft. 3 in. in height.

By trade I'm a prospector and a hunter of lost mines in Arizona, but I'm a long way from home and would like some pen pals.

153 S. 3rd St.
LaFayette, Ind.
EARL ALDRIDGE

Fingers Crossed

Dear Editor,

It would make me very pleased and happy to have some pen pals from all over. I have brown, short, curly hair and gray eyes. I wear plastic-rimmed glasses, am 18 years old and a junior in high school.

I love to write and receive letters, listen to the radio, embroider and do many other things. I'll be looking for lots of letters and I promise to answer every one. I'll also exchange snapshots with everyone. I've got my fingers crossed, folks.

LUCILLE SCHMIDT
345 S. 9th St.
Cherokee, Iowa

Attention, Singers

Dear Editor,

Hope this plea isn't too unusual and that you can find a little corner in Pen Pards for it. I'm especially interested in corresponding with those who like piano and gospel singing.

I am a radio engineer and have a rather lonely job with plenty of time to write. I'm in my thirties, stand 5 ft. 11 in. high, weigh 150 lbs., have medium-dark hair, light complexion and have hazel eyes.

Most of all, I'm fond of music and various types of musical entertainment. I also like the movies and most sports. Regardless of personal interests or hobbies, all are invited to write, so please, pen pals, don't let me down.

JOHN H. OXFORD
201 Maple St.
Paris, Tenn.

Mysterious Marvis

Dear Editor,

Would someone like to have a gal from Idaho as a pen pal? I'm the gal. Just turned 17, have dark-brown hair and blue eyes, stand 5 ft. 6 in. tall and weigh 124 lbs.

I'd love to hear from boys and gals all over the world. I like to go horseback riding and swimming and to go to rodeos. Singing is another favorite of mine and I sew, read, go hiking and camping, and listen to the radio, too.

Anyone who wants to find anything else about me is going to have to write, so how about it?

MARVIS SMITH
Route 1, Box 222-B
Lewiston, Idaho

How About Irving?

Dear Editor,

How about me? Thirty years old, average height, about 160 lbs. Author, composer, poet, slightly professional, that's me in a nutshell.

I'll answer every single letter and send a picture to all those who want one. Nothing more I can think of, except that I hope I'll receive a few letters.

IRVING CHANSKY
558 Main Street
Stamford, Conn.

Their Majesties

Dear Editor,

Here are two cowgirls from the Far West who urge you to get your pens and pencils going full speed ahead.

We are interested in all kinds of sports, especially dancing and riding. We were both rodeo queens at one time.

Darlene has long blonde hair, blue-gray eyes and stands 5 ft. 8 in. tall. Donna is 5 ft. 5 in. tall, has blue-green eyes and brown hair. We are both 17 years old.

We would like to hear from ranch hands or

rodeo contestants. Photographs will be exchanged.

DONNA MILLIKIN
305 9th St.
Redmond, Ore.
and
DARLENE FIELDS
Redmond, Ore.

Model Man

Dear Editor,

I would like to join your pen pals club. I'm 6 years old, 5 ft. 4½ in. tall, weigh 130 lbs. and have brown hair and green eyes. I like all sports, indoors and out, and I make model airplanes as a hobby. I will exchange snapshots with everyone who writes.

JAMES SIMPSON
1029 W. 38th St.
Los Angeles 37, Calif.

Shorty

Dear Editor,

I've just found out how much fun pen pals can be and I would like to get in on it myself, with letters from boys and girls between the ages of 15 and 18.

My nickname is "Shorty". I'm 15 years old, stand 5 ft. tall, weigh 103 lbs. and have brown hair and hazel eyes. I love sports, especially basketball and swimming. My hobby is music.

It would be very nice to get letters, so fill my mail box way up to the brim. I will exchange snaps.

DONNA HILLWIG
Box 62, Robinson St.
East Brady, Pa.

Radio Ranny

Dear Editor,

May I reserve some space in your next issue to extend an invitation for pen pals? I am 23 years old, have brown eyes and brown hair, weigh about 145 lbs., and stand 5 ft. 11½ in. tall.

I like to take pictures, enjoy all music and like square dancing. I like most sports, but playing baseball is my favorite. I work at our radio station as a radio operator at night, when there isn't much to do, so I would like some pen pals to write to. I'd like to hear from anyone interested and I will exchange snapshots.

ALVIN PETERS
323 W. 8th St.
North Platte, Neb.

Cactus Cuties

Dear Editor,

Is there any chance of a couple of hillbillies having their letter printed? We've tried many times, but have never succeeded.

Verd is 28 years old, stands 5 ft. 3 in. tall, weighs 129 lbs. and has brown hair and eyes. Her hobby is collecting pillow tops from different states and folder view cards.

Jean is 23 years old, stands 5 ft. 2 in. tall, weighs 120 lbs. and has brown hair and eyes. Her hobby is collecting [illegible] songs and view cards.

We live on a large ranch and, believe us, it does get lonesome out here, with nothing much to do but look at sagebrush and cactus. We promise an answer and a picture to all who write.

VERD NICHOLS
and
JEAN CARVER
P. O. Box 654
Fort Morgan, Colo.

Cherokee Pow-Wow

Dear Editor,

May I become one of your new members? I am married, have one child—a little boy 17 months old. My hobbies are reading, writing poetry and collecting Indian relics.

One of my poems has been published and some others broadcast over the radio. Perhaps one reason I like to collect Indian relics is the fact that I can proudly boast of a dash—one-eighth to be exact—of Cherokee Indian blood in my veins. My great-grandfather was a "quarter-blood" Cherokee. I am 32 years old, have dark hair and eyes and stand 6 ft. tall. I served in the army during World War II, as a private and gunner-rifleman in a anti-tank company.

I would especially like to receive letters from young people here in the U. S. who are of Cherokee Indian descent. I would like to buy a real Indian costume, made by an Indian—including feathered headress or "war bonnet," coat and trousers and moccasins. I'll be waiting for some letters and promise to answer all who write to me.

WILLIAM EARL LIVELY
c/o Chester Clark Res.
204 E. Stuart Ave.
Decatur, Ill.

Cow Bunny From Virginia

Dear Editor,

Here is a 16-year-old junior in Keokee High School who would like to join the fun in Pen Pards. I'm 5 ft. 2 in. tall, have hair that's between dark blonde and light brown. My eyes are dark gray.

I like most sports, enjoy good books, movies and music and collect pictures for a hobby, but most of all I like to write letters and make new friends.

As this is my first attempt, I hope to see my letter published. I promise to answer all letters I receive, so, come one, come all, young or old, from one of the forty-eight states or from a foreign country, drop me a few lines. I promise to answer and will also exchange snapshots.

JOE-ANNE BARKER
Keokee, Va.

That ends our October tally sheet, tophands. If your letter wasn't printed, it probably means that we just couldn't find the room to squeeze you into our corral. Address your letters to RANGELAND LOVE STORIES, 205 E. 42nd Street, New York 17, New York.

"Johnny," she said, "aren't you going to kiss me good-by?"

TEXAS IN HER HEART

By Clark Gray

Adorable little Brenda was Texas born and Texas bred—and she wasn't fussy about what man she picked . . . to make her Texas wed.

BRENDA was sitting in the hotel dining room in Spur, Texas, having her last meal with Johnny Lanton before the train came in. She was a pert young thing of eighteen, rounded and pretty and pink, with a dab of a hat on her yellow hair, and a sensible velvet traveling dress that didn't look sensible, and silly little slippers. There was a faint V of unhappiness between her bright blue eyes.

"Dang it, Johnny! Schooling don't help

and when it comes to wrassling steers."

Johnny Lanton shook his head. "You ain't going to wrassle no more steers, Brenda. You're going back to that Mrs. McGrew's Academy for Young Ladies in Boston and finish your education."

"Pooey!" Brenda snorted. "Being a young lady on a ranch in Texas is just about like being a catfish in the dust bowl. They just don't go together. I never wanted to be a lady anyhow." She smiled sweetly at Johnny Lanton. "Please, Johnny. Let me stay."

Johnny said, "No," and got a little red. Johnny was a gangling, sun-browned puncher with an honest face and a troubled look now in the depths of gray eyes. He said uneasily, "Your dad knew what was best for you, Brenda."

Brenda glared at him in exasperation. This Johnny Lanton was a stubborn cuss, for all he wasn't much older than she. Brenda knew there wasn't much use arguing with him.

Johnny had been just as stubborn about the bucking string, she remembered. One time Johnny had offered to break a particularly wild-eyed sorrel stallion for her dad after the regular bronc buster had shied off. The stallion had thrown Johnny against a fence, spraining his wrist. But Johnny had stubbornly had the wrist taped. He climbed up on the stallion again, his lips twisted with pain. On the third try he had ridden the animal. But if it hadn't been on the third try, it would have been the fifth or the fifteenth, Brenda knew. Johnny was the kind that just didn't give up.

Brenda sighed. "Dad thought a girl ought to drink tea and act refined and know all about Hawthorne and Emerson. Boston's full of consumptive-looking females that can do that. But, Johnny, they'd be scared to death if they had to dehorn a poor little old weanling calf. I'm a rancher's daughter. I want to act like one."

"You're a rancher's daughter," Johnny said quietly. "But you ain't got no ranch, Brenda. After your dad's debts was paid, there was only enough to finish you off at that Boston school."

"I could buy a place," Brenda argued. "There'd be enough for the down payment. And you could be foreman, just like you were for Dad."

Johnny said, "No."

Brenda snapped angrily, "It's my money."

"Yes. But your dad made me executor of his estate. He knew what'd happen if you got your hands on any money. You'd try to buy a ranch, and he didn't want that. He wanted you to finish school, Brenda."

Brenda shrugged slim shoulders and took another sip out of her coffee cup and gave it up. Arguing with Johnny was like arguing with a Missouri billygoat.

"All right," she said, "dang you, Johnny! I guess I'll go back to Boston and end up marrying the second vice-president of a shoestring factory. And it'll be your fault."

Johnny grinned, and Brenda glanced hopelessly at the big clock on the wall. It lacked only a half hour to train time. In a half hour she'd be leaving Texas for good.

THE hotel dining room was beginning to fill up with lank cattlemen and their women. Gunbelts, strapped around lean waists. Faded sunbonnets. Jangling spurs. Stetson hats, prized and sweaty, cuffed to the back of windburned faces.

Over the clatter of dishes, Brenda listened to the flat Texas talk of cows and weather and dust with a faint nostalgia creeping over her. She had missed Texas, back in Boston, and now after her father's death she would miss it even more.

A tall, impeccably dressed man entered the dining room with coattails swaying, and crossed the floor toward an empty table. Brenda looked at him and recognized him idly as Malcomb Wintergreen, owner of the new Bar W on the west side

of the county. Wintergreen was handsome, she noticed, in a Greek God sort of way. Not handsome after the manner of the average Texan, with honesty and good humor shining out of a weathered face, but handsome because of sheer physical good looks, because of a calculated coldness in his glance. He wore a small black mustache, and his side whiskers were a little longer than average. Losing interest, she turned back to Johnny.

"What'll you do now, Johnny? With the ranch being rented out—"

Johnny Lanton shifted beefy shoulders in his chair. "I thought of going into business for myself, Brenda." Johnny gestured at Malcomb Wintergreen with his thumb. The Bar W's taking bids on a fencing contract. They've got about twenty miles of four-wire, *bois d'arc* fence to build."

"Oh? I hear Wintergreen's a tough boss." Curiously Brenda turned back once again to look at the handsome ranch owner. Wintergreen was joking with a waitress; Brenda noticed that the waitress was blushing. Wintergreen had that reputation, she remembered. Half the girls in town were secretly in love with him.

Watching the man and the waitress as they talked, it came to Brenda that if she really wanted to stay in Texas, she could likely get a job here at the hotel. But that wouldn't satisfy her, she knew. She didn't care about living in town, any town. She wanted to live on a ranch.

Suddenly Brenda sat upright in her chair, gripping her coffee cup and feeling a faint warmth on her own pink cheeks. The daring idea that circled rashly through her brain made her gasp with her own boldness. *But why not,* she asked herself. *I want to stay on a ranch, but I can't, because Johnny Lanton won't give me my money. But maybe there are other ways.*

She glanced covertly at Johnny, but he was rolling a cigarette with strong, stubby fingers. He hadn't noticed her warm cheeks. Nor had he sensed her thoughts.

"That'd be interesting," Brenda said, with a hint of breathlessness in her voice. "Building fence, I mean."

Johnny grinned idly. "Lots of hard work. A little money."

"Yes," Brenda said. "But it could lead to other things."

It could indeed, Brenda thought excitedly. Like becoming the wife of the country's biggest rancher. If she had to choose, she reflected somewhat desperately, between a rancher and the second vice-president of a shoestring factory, she'd take the rancher every time, regardless. And if she was married, Johnny could keep her money till he strangled on it.

"Johnny," Brenda said. "I've got an idea. I needn't go back to Boston right away." Once more she tried her sweetest smile. "Let me work on the fencing contract with you."

Johnny Lanton looked up quickly. He scowled and rubbed his chin with a calloused thumb. "Now what's in that pretty head of yours?"

"I'd be a big help," Brenda pleaded. "I could go on to Boston after you finished the fencing job. I—I just want to stay out here a little while. Please, Johnny."

Johnny Lanton stood up and ground out his cigarette in his saucer. His brown face was expressionless. "Nothing doing, Brenda. Time to catch your train."

BRENDA studied him in exasperated futility as she walked reluctantly beside him down the plank walk, past the Red Dog Saloon and the Texas Livery and the Empire Hotel to the red brick railroad station. He walked a little awkwardly in his high-heeled boots, like any Texan, but there was nothing clumsy about him, nothing to suggest that he wasn't every inch a Westerner and a man. And a powerful stubborn one, Brenda thought.

She felt her own jaw set with grim determination. Stubborn or not, she was go-

ing to prove to Johnny Lanton that she could get her own way once in a while.

Glumly she waited on the brick runway beside the steel tracks for Johnny to bring her suitcase from the station. She leaned against a steel-tired baggage truck, racking her brain. There must be some way to make Johnny change his mind. If she could only think of it!

She glanced at him as he emerged from the station weighted down with three suitcases, a cheerful grin on his face. And then the instinctive knowledge of how she could get her way with Johnny came to her, and she felt her heart begin to turn over and over slowly, and there was a strange sensation of giddy lightness in her stomach.

She bit her lips quickly to bring color to them. Johnny set down the suitcases and pulled a big gold-colored watch on a leather strap out of his pocket.

"Ten minutes," Johnny said, "and you'll be on your way, Brenda."

Brenda nodded. Her heart began to turn faster.

"Johnny," she said abruptly, "Aren't you going to kiss me good-by?"

Johnny looked startled. He squinted at her out of his gray eyes, and the little wrinkles around his mouth deepened suddenly, almost as if he were about to grin. But then he drawled calmly, "Why, Brenda, I reckon I will."

He stepped close and his arms went around her shoulders. Big brawny arms with the biceps hard as rock against her. His face was a brown, weathered, grinning canvas, oddly attractive as he pulled her to him. And then his lips touched hers.

Brenda felt a thrill go through her. Her breath sighed out of her, and for one moment there was no sound, no movement, only a great unearthly calm, with the sensation of Johnny's lips touching her own. Then Brenda remembered that she had let Johnny kiss her for a reason.

She pushed away. "Please, Johnny," she said. "Please, let me stay and help you."

Johnny still had his brawny hands on her shoulders. He held her at arm's length, and now the wrinkles around his mouth were definitely forming a grin, and his eyes were shrewd and laughing.

"It didn't work, Brenda. It was fun, but you're still going to Boston."

Brenda said savagely, "You devil," and she kicked him. Her foot struck the thick upper section of Johnny's boots; the force of the blow bent Brenda's silly little slipper and hurt her toe. But Johnny didn't seem to feel anything. He just kept grinning.

"You devil," Brenda said again. "You —you stubborn south end of a northbound mule! You long-eared, half alligator—"

She broke off. Tears spurted. Fiercely she blinked them back. She was so angry she could hardly speak, and yet despair lay like a heavy indigestible thing in her and she knew that Johnny had beaten her. She could not stay on a ranch without money unless she married somebody like Malcomb Wintergreen, and she couldn't marry Wintergreen until she got acquainted with him, and she couldn't get acquainted with him because Johnny had her money. It was a vicious circle, she thought bitterly, that only Johnny could break.

From afar off, she heard the lonely whistle of the incoming train. The iron track at her feet began to hum. If she only had some money, Brenda thought frantically. Even a little money!

She straightened, suddenly. She blinked, feeling her head spin a little. She glared at Johnny.

"*You* haven't got any money. How are you going to finance this fence-building business?"

For the first time a look of alarm came to Johnny's gray eyes. He put a hand on her shoulder and turned her toward the train, which was a pinpoint of smoke and charging steel now, far down the vanishing line of track. "Here comes your train," Johnny said, and he sounded nervous.

"Have you got all your things, Brenda?"

"You're going to borrow from the bank," Brenda said. "Why didn't I think of that?"

"I'll write you a letter in Boston." Johnny began to pick up her suitcases. There was a scowl of downright urgency on his weathered face. "Your dad wanted you to be a lady, Brenda. Remember that."

"I can borrow from the bank, too," Brenda said excitedly. "I can go into the fencing business, same as you, Johnny. I know all about post-hole digging and bracing and stretching barbed wire."

She felt her face begin to glow. She looked back up the rutted streets of the little town, past them to the wide expanse of Texas prairie, where groups of cattle were grazing steadily and contentedly. "I can stay," she heard herself crying. "I don't have to be a damned lady after all!"

Johnny Lanton sighed heavily. He set down the suitcases on the brick runway and took makings out of his pocket and began to build a smoke, his eyes appraising her. At length he nodded gravely, unhappily.

"All right, Brenda. I tried to do it your dad's way, but it didn't work. You can have the job keeping books for my crew. Maybe in time you'll change your mind."

BRENDA knew quite well that she'd never change her mind, but she had won all the victory she needed for now, so she didn't argue with Johnny about that. Later on, after she was safely married to Malcomb Wintergreen, Johnny would see what a danged idiot he had been in trying to force her to forsake the life she loved. Johnny would learn his lesson, Brenda thought grimly.

She planned her campaign with utmost care. First, she knew, it'd be necessary to make Malcomb Wintergreen notice her, for he certainly wouldn't ask her to marry him until he was attracted by her in some manner. To that end she wangled permission to help Johnny survey the fence line.

She rode the line with a wagonload of stakes, while Johnny followed with a surveyor's transit. Directed by Johnny's waving arm behind the transit, Brenda set her row of stakes a rod apart, where the fence-posts were to be installed. She wore a split riding skirt that showed her slender, well-turned legs to advantage, and she propped a broad-brimmed hat on the back of her yellow curls, and she kept a weather eye on the horizon for the first appearance of ranch owner Wintergreen. He showed up the second day, riding a buggy.

"I didn't know you'd hired a lady." Malcomb Wintergreen dismounted on stiff legs from the buggy and shook hands with Johnny Lanton. Wintergreen wore the same Clawhammer coat he'd sported in town, and he had the same air of unassailable dignity.

Johnny Lanton rubbed his fist across a two-day growth of beard and grinned. "She ain't no lady, Wintergreen. This here's Brenda Clyde."

"Delighted!" Malcomb Wintergreen touched his small black mustache and smiled at Brenda. His black-garbed figure looked somehow out of place on the greening Texas prairie. "I met your father a time or two before his unfortunate demise. He told me you were attending school in Boston."

"Yes." Brenda nodded a little unhappily. She didn't want Malcomb to get the wrong impression of her. She tried her most dazzling smile. "But I'm a Texas gal at heart, Mr. Wintergreen. How come you don't ride a horse instead of that buggy?"

Malcomb Wintergreen sighed. "I—ah—am of a delicate constitution. I don't enjoy riding on the back of an animal."

"You don't?" Brenda looked at him in puzzlement. She herself enjoyed nothing better than a brisk canter across the short-grassed, wind-swept plains. But then Wintergreen broached a new subject.

"I wonder if you'd care to take tea with me some afternoon." Wintergreen hesitated, flushing slightly. "It—ah—would be quite proper. I have a Mexican woman

who does my housework who'd be there."

Brenda wasn't worried about the propriety of taking tea in Malcomb Wintergreen's house. She was a nice girl and knew it, and she was able to take care of herself. But something about Wintergreen's manner did disturb her. She found herself thinking that he was a strange sort of man to be a rancher.

Johnny Lanton evidently had similar convictions, for Brenda caught Johnny grinning at her with shrewd eyes as the afternoon wore on. But if Johnny suspected her intentions of marrying Wintergreen, he didn't say anything.

The next day at noon, after the last of the stakes were set, Johnny gruffly dismissed her. Brenda borrowed one of the work horses and rode to the big ranch headquarters with her heart thumping a little in spite of herself.

It was an oddly disappointing occasion. Malcomb Wintergreen served tea and little cakes. He watched her closely as she drank her tea; and Brenda, to her own chagrin, found herself balancing her saucer on her knee and drinking daintily with little finger extended, exactly as if she had been in Mrs. McGrew's Academy for Young Ladies. Then Wintergreen asked her opinion of Emerson's essay on Compensation. Fortunately Brenda had read it in her American Literature course, but she hadn't been able to make head or tail out of it, and she told Wintergreen so. Wintergreen smiled and said that she was charmingly frank, that perhaps a man's viewpoint was required to understand Mr. Emerson. After an hour, Brenda rode away on her borrowed work horse with her head spinning in complete amazement.

It was utterly ridiculous that a man who drank tea and read Emerson, who refused to ride a horse, could be a successful rancher. And yet, ridiculous or not, it was a fact, plain for Brenda to see with her own eyes. She tried to tell herself that it didn't matter, that she wanted to marry a rancher, any rancher, and that Wintergreen would do as well as the next man. Yet she felt uneasy and faintly guilty. For the first time it occurred to Brenda that a girl could pay too high a price for the privilege of living on a ranch. She pushed the thought aside hastily.

The post setting began next day. Johnny hired three men to walk down the line of stakes with post-hole diggers, punching three-foot holes at each stake. Brenda followed with the wagon loaded with *bois d'arc* posts, which had been shipped in from Kansas. The posts were crooked and a few of them had long sharp thorns, but they would last a lifetime in the dry Texas soil, she knew. Johnny admired the posts.

"Posts are like men," Johnny told her. "You take a blackjack post; it won't last but a couple years. Whiteoak is better, and cedar better yet. *Bois d'arc* is best of all. But you have to know posts, Brenda, just like you have to know men. You can't tell by looking which is the best post, unless you've had experience with all of them."

There was some hidden meaning in Johnny's words, Brenda was sure. But she couldn't put her finger on it, any more than she could exactly place the reason for Johnny's knowing grin in the days that followed. Johnny made Brenda nervous. It was as if he was reading her mind and laughing at her as she began to spend more and more of her evenings with Malcomb Wintergreen.

Malcomb Wintergreen couldn't read her mind at all, Brenda knew. He took her into the Spur Hotel for suppers, took her to square dances and to a performance of the Spur Opera House, and on long lonely buggy rides. He talked about Emerson and Hawthorne, and about a German author called Goethe whom Brenda had never heard of. Brenda saw the envious glances she received from the other girls in Spur, and she knew she ought to consider herself lucky, for it was only a question of time until Malcomb Wintergreen proposed. Brenda could read the signs. And when he

did propose, then she, Brenda, could live on Bar W for the rest of her life, which was what she wanted.

Only Brenda couldn't get rid of a cold feeling of guilt and shame. And this, she knew, was because she didn't love Wintergreen.

SHE tried hard to love him. As the last of the posts were set and tamped and the shining barbed wire was unrolled from her wagon, Brenda fought furious battles with herself. She tried to tell herself that she didn't know Wintergreen well enough, that every man was lovable in spite of his faults. But always Johnny Lanton was there, grinning at her as he worked driving staples or sweating at the wire stretcher, and always Brenda was forced to recognize that Johnny was the true Texas type of man and Wintergreen wasn't. Some girls could love Wintergreen, but not Brenda.

Nevertheless, on the night the last of the wire was stapled in place, Brenda went for another buggy ride with Wintergreen. She had a pretty good hunch he had selected this evening for his proposal; the fencing contract was finished now and she was a free woman again, without a job or anything to keep her in Spur. Wintergreen's handsome face was a little pale, but as Greek-godish as ever as he tooled the buggy through the lights of town to the bridge that crossed Cat Creek. The horse's hooves made a thumping, hollow sound on the planks of the bridge. Across the creek, Wintergreen pulled the buggy to a halt.

"Brenda," Wintergreen said gently, "it is time we had a talk."

There was a half moon. It reflected a cold blue light off Wintergreen's pale face, and Brenda searched his eyes and tried desperately, willfully to love him. But something inside her was dead. She forced a smile.

"Yes, Malcomb?"

"You must know," Wintergreen said, "that I have a high regard for you, Brenda. Women see these things. But it is more than an ordinary regard. We have so much in common, a love of books, of the finer things . . ." Wintergreen paused, and Brenda thought for one frantic moment that he was going to quote poetry to her. But he didn't. He said simply, "I want to marry you, darling."

Brenda closed her eyes. And so it was here. The thing she had wanted ever since the day Johnny Lanton had told her she must go back to Boston. Now she was free. Free to stay in Texas, to live on a ranch, to wrassle steers and dehorn dogies and ride the grassy plains on the back of a spirited horse.

Only she was not free, really, she saw. She felt a deeply sickening sense of despair. She was not free because she could not love Malcomb Wintergreen, and only that—love for Wintergreen—could give her complete, honest liberty.

If I could only love him, she thought. *If I could only, only love him.* The memory of Johnny Lanton rose up before her, of that kiss he had given her at the railroad station. She had almost loved Johnny at that instant. She wondered if a kiss from Wintergreen would have the same effect. She didn't know. He had never kissed her.

Suddenly hopeful, she said, "Kiss me, Malcomb."

Wintergreen said, "W-what?" And then a light of happiness shone in Wintergreen's eyes, and he said, "Sweetheart!" and he leaned forward to kiss her.

His lips touched Brenda's, and they were cold. His little black mustache was a tickling, bristly thing alongside her nose, and she could smell the bay rum he had applied after shaving. It had a sweetish, almost nauseating scent. Brenda felt these sensations of touch and scent, and nothing more. There was no thrill, no delight, no overwhelming love, nothing. Brenda felt hot tears sting her eyes, and she pushed away, choking with sudden misery.

"I can't do it! I simply can't! Please, Malcomb, take me back to town."

MALCOMB WINTERGREEN peered at her, his mustache a little askew. He blinked rapidly. A hurt look crossed his face, like a puppy that has been whipped and doesn't understand.

"But, Brenda," he protested. "You didn't let me finish. I—I don't expect you to live on the ranch. I wanted to take you East."

"East!"

Brenda's tears ran down her cheeks unheeded. She stared, completely astounded. "East! Did you think I wanted to go East?"

"But of course. A girl of your fine sensi- [illegible] . . ."

"East!" Brenda screamed. "Why, you idiot, that's the last thing I wanted!"

Malcomb Wintergreen's head jerked up. His hurt puppy look was replaced by one of indignation. "I'm sorry, Brenda. I though you understood that I was from the East. I—I only came out here because it was my father's idea. He thought if he bought me a ranch it would—would make a—a he-man out of me." Wintergreen paused, rubbed his moustache ruefully. "Perhaps it was a foolish idea."

"Oh, Malcomb." Brenda was instantly contrite. "I'm sorry. I didn't know you were an Easterner."

"Yes. And I intend to sell the ranch and go back there. This experiment has not been too successful." Wintergreen sighed. "I wish you'd reconsider, Brenda. I am not exactly a poor man, you know. My father owns a factory."

"A *factory*!" Brenda threw back her head and suddenly all the built-up tension of the weeks snapped and she began to laugh. She laughed till the shrill sound of it echoed back from the creek bank behind them. "Oh, Malcomb, don't tell me it's a shoestring factory!"

"No," Malcomb said stiffly, staring at her in hurt puzzlement. "It's a loom factory, Brenda." His shoulders went back. "I'm the second vice-president," he announced.

"Oh, Malcomb! Take me back to town!" Tears were streaming down Brenda's face, half happiness and half regret. But somehow she was relaxed and comfortable. "A loom factory's as bad as a shoestring factory. And a second vice-president is a second vice-president, regardless. Take me back to town, Malcomb, and go find you some nice tea-drinking Eastern girl. You can find one that understands Emerson, Malcomb. I know you can."

* * *

She went into the Spur Hotel dining room with traces of tears still on her face, but she was smiling. She was warm and happy inside, for no particular reason at all that she could think of. The dining room was filled with cattlemen and their women, with the clatter of dishes and the jangle of spurs and the low sound of voices, talking cows and brands and weather. Brenda decided that she was happy just because for a little while yet she was in Texas, where she wanted to be. True, she would have to go back to Boston now, but she had enough money saved out of her wages to stay a few weeks, anyhow.

She saw Johnny Lanton sitting at a corner table drinking coffee, and even the sight of Johnny didn't destroy her happiness. She went toward him, and Johnny stood up, a grin creasing his weathered face. He had an odd look of relief in his gray eyes.

"What happened to Wintergreen?"

Brenda sat down opposite him and ordered coffee. She looked at the leathery wrinkles around his eyes, the mahogany brown color of his skin, the honesty and good nature of his face, and she thought with a bit of wistfulness that it would have been fun if Johnny Lanton had been in Malcomb Wintergreen's shoes. She wouldn't have had any trouble loving Johnny, she thought.

"I sent him home," she said. "Remember what you told me about posts being like men, Johnny? It's true. But it isn't easy finding it out."

"Experience," Johnny said. "Tough to get, but worth the knocks."

Brenda nodded. "Malcomb Wintergreen's had some experience, too. He's selling Bar W and going East."

"I know." Johnny lit a cigarette casually. "I talked to his lawyer yesterday. The Bar W's quite a buy for somebody. A nice ranch, Brenda."

"Yes." She smiled ruefully at Johnny. "I expect there's enough money in Dad's estate to make the down payment on it."

"I expect there is." Johnny studied the tip of his cigarette. The wrinkles around his mouth deepened a little. "I expect you could buy the place tomorrow, if you had the money your dad left you."

Brenda leaned forward, her fingers suddenly white and taut around her coffee cup with an unreasonable hope. "Would—could you let me have my money, Johnny?"

Johnny grinned. "No, Brenda," he said.

Brenda bit her lip. But she didn't feel like swearing. She didn't feel like kicking Johnny again, or calling him the south end of a northbound mule. Even if she did have to go back to Boston, she could be happy for a while, she thought.

"You see," Johnny was explaining with quiet seriousness. "Your dad gave me a responsibility, Brenda. He said straight out in his will that he wanted me to use the money to send you to school. I couldn't go against your dad's last wish, could I?"

"No," Brenda said, "I guess not."

"There's one clause in the will, though," Johnny went on, "that releases me from my responsibility." He knocked cigarette ash into his saucer. He was elaborately casual. "That's if you get married."

Brenda said, "*What?*"

"If you get married," Johnny said, "you don't have to go to school. I give you the money, and my part of the job is ended. That's what the will says."

"It does?" Brenda was suddenly faint. She felt Johnny's gray eyes, and there was something penetrating in his appraisal of her, something that went right down to the innermost core of her, where her most secret feelings lay. She felt blood begin to beat rapidly into her face.

"We couldn't!" Her voice came out surprisingly weak and breathless.

"Couldn't we?" Johnny Lanton said. "That's up to you, Brenda. I know now that you'd never marry a man you didn't love. And you know that, too."

"Yes," Brenda said, "I—I guess I wouldn't."

And then Brenda stood up. She had a wonderful feeling of freedom, complete freedom, standing there in the midst of her Texas friends and neighbors in the dining room, standing in the place she loved and with the man she loved.

"Kiss me, Johnny," Brenda said. "Like you did at the railroad station."

Johnny's eyelids went up. "Here?"

"Right here," Brenda said. "If you're not ashamed."

"I ain't ashamed," Johnny said, "if you ain't."

And he wasn't. And neither was Brenda.

If Polio Comes . . .

- **DON'T get chilled**
- **DON'T get overtired**
- **DON'T mix with new groups**
- **DON'T have throat operations**

1951 Polio Pointers by the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis

Record Wrangling

By ARIZONA BLAKE

HOWDY, tophands. The record companies are really plowing up the musical field to bring you the best in platter-fare, and I can tell you that my ears are plumb bent from listening to all the new waxings and trying to decide which ones you pardners would be most interested to hear about.

There's something for everyone below, from authentic-styled Western songs and hillbillies to pop-tunes and records for the younkers and classical music. Let's start with the cream of the crop, the new Decca album featuring the original cast of the New York theatrical production, THE KING AND I.

Rodgers and Hammerstein wrote this smash hit starring actress Gertrude Lawrence, from the story of "Anna and the King of Siam." You'll be hearing many of the songs from the album, including the spirited "I Whistle A Happy Tune," the hauntingly lovely waltz, "Hello Young Lovers," and the romantic "We Kiss In A Shadow," on singles (Perry Como for RCA Victor and Bing Crosby for Decca), but most of you will want the album.

OLD SOLDIERS NEVER DIE
LOVE AND DEVOTION

Vaughn Monroe (RCA Victor)

General Douglas MacArthur started it, and the songsters are making sure that his phrase will not be allowed to fade away. Of the many versions, we prefer Vaughn Monroe's full-bodied baritone singing the now-famous military ballad to Tom Glazer's lyrics. It's a timely tribute to all of America's soldiers, from "Washington and Grant and Lee" to "Eisenhower, Bradley and MacArthur."

Vaughn Monroe's version was on sale within two days after General MacArthur concluded his historic report to Congress, which may give you some idea of how quickly the recording studios also leaped into action, with MGM, Columbia and 20th Century Fox all rushing to file as a movie title "Old Soldiers Never Die," for a picture that still had to be written and produced!

Yep, the general certainly touched off an epidemic that you'll be hearing about for a long time.

PARDON MY WHISKERS
OLD-FASHIONED MATRIMONY IN MIND

by Wayne Raney (King)

This jasper's got OLD-FASHIONED MATRIMONY IN MIND, so "if you wanna settle down," cow bunnies—start listening! The discmate (both these platters were written by Wayne himself) is a

swell back-country tune that asks you to PARDON MY WHISKERS "while I kiss you good night."

J. T. Capps has sent me some really interesting background on the Harmonica King, and while I haven't room to print all of it, I'm passing some of it on. Wayne used to hang his harmonica around his neck, enclosed in a holder made out of scrap wire, so that he could sing and play while working in the field, hoeing and plowing cotton. When he was only 14 years old, back in 1934, he started hitchhiking his way through almost every state in the country, playing for whatever money he could pick up at clubs and cafes.

And one day, when he had only eleven cents in his pocket, a radio station manager in Texas heard him playing in a pool hall—and hired him. Since then, you fans know that he's played over many stations—and today he's heard regularly over 110 stations.

Thanks a lot for writing in, J. T. Capps—and King Records tells us that Wayne Raney will send you pictures of himself if you write him at his home in Wolf Bayou, Arkansas.

DISC JOTTINGS

MUGGSY SPANIER FAVORITES is the name of this swell jazz album (RCA) with old-time evergreens like At The Jazz Band Ball," "Mandy, Make Up Your Mind" and "Big Butter and Egg Man" really grooved by that cornet man and his ragtime band.

Remember the cowboy folksong about meaner'n pizen Sam Hill? Well, here's another scalawag, singing in the same emphatic, catchy style, MY NAME IS TEXAS DAN "and right or wrong, I do as I please!" Carson Robison vocalizes about this gent who sticks his chin way out as he puts a chip on his shoulder and counts the notches in his gun.

Coral Records has TV comedian Jerry Lester singing TIME TAKES CARE OF EVERYTHING—a lament with a novel twist. Jerry bought his cow bunny "some new teeth, fixed your nose . . ." "and then you turned around and married my brother Lou." And the surprise comes when you guess who's sorry. The flip is ORANGE-COLORED SKY, but what mere man could match that woman Betty Hutton when it comes to talking?

BRING BACK THE THRILL
IF IT HADN'T BEEN FOR YOU

by Eddie Fisher with Hugo Winterhalter's Orchestra (RCA Victor)

Eddie Cantor's fledgling songbird of last year has really found his wings in this song, and he gives out with a big sound in "BRING BACK THE THRILL of the love that we shared." The discmate has more of Eddie Fisher's persuasive yearning, as he throbs, "IF IT HADN'T BEEN FOR YOU I'd still be lonely."

Since he may be drafted soon, Eddie "junior" is really giving his all on what could be his last waxings for a time. And meanwhile, Eddie "senior" is also keeping plumb busy, for his life story is going to be filmed soon, a la the "Jolson Story."

BRING BACK THE THRILL
A PENNY A KISS, A PENNY A HUG

by Mary Mayo (Capitol)

Those of you who prefer a muted, quieter version, will hitch onto Mary Mayo's soft and effective arrangement. The coupler, which her spouse conducts—these husband and wife teams seem to be sprouting all over—is a saucy rhythm song which should fit right into the national need for thrift. That's because Mary, sided by the Four Chicks and a Chuck, are "gonna save a penny every time we baby talk." At A PENNY A KISS, A PENNY A HUG, you can see where the patriotic spirit will really pay off.

CALL OF THE OUTLAW
I ASKED A DREAM
by Eddie Dean and His Boys (Mercury)

"Some call it wind from the pine trees . . but you and I know . . . it's the outlaw calling his mate," Eddie Dean chants, while the backing projects an atmosphere of wild prairie moonlight.

Spin the disc, and you come up with a translation of a Spanish tune, *Solamente una vez.* Basically the same song, Eddie's version has hogtied some of the original's plaintiveness as he intones, "I ASKED A DREAM and from the blue starry sky, my every dream has come true."

PACKING UP MY BARRACKS BAGS BLUES
EXCUSES
by Cactus Pryor and His Pricklypears (4 Star)

Rasp-voiced Cactus Pryor is keeping right up with the times when he sings those "In again, out again PACKING UP MY BARRACKS BAGS BLUES." Yep, it's back to Army life for this jigger, and he's as noisy as a calf corral about it as he sings in humorous vein that "they taught me how to march . . . but they didn't have to teach me how to run."

He's got better cause to complain on the second side, where "All I ever hear is EXCUSES . . . they clutter up my ear." He should know, since when he asks for a raise he's told that "money is the root of evil, and I'd hate to have you sin!"

MR. AND MISSISSIPPI
SHE'S MY BABY
Tennessee Ernie (Capitol)

Here's that virile-voiced "Mule" man back again with a top-deck saga of life on the great river. Tennessee Ernie knows what to do with a hit tune when he has it, and folks, he sure has it here.

The song on the lower berth of this waxing is a delightfully humorous waltz novelty.

A BEGGAR IN LOVE
I'LL NEVER KNOW WHY
Herb Jeffries (Coral)

"A BEGGAR IN LOVE" is an up-and-coming ballad riding the musical range, with Herb Jeffries the waddy who warmly warbles the words in a way that should please all the old Russ Colombo fans.

Jeffries scores again on the brother side of the platter, when he sings another intimate tale of longing in unaffected fashion, about a galoot who grieves that he'll "NEVER KNOW WHY."

YEARLINGS' RECORDINGS

Danny Kaye's gone and done it again, coming out with a truly delightful and singable Decca recording for the youngsters. With lots of zest, he sings the humorous lyrics, "I'm a little white duck, sittin' in the water, doin' what I orta . . ." Then along comes a little green frog, and more animals, with Danny mimicking the animals' sounds and everybody having fun.

This side is called THE LITTLE WHITE DUCK, and on the other side Danny adds to his roster of waxings the most talked-about thing state-wise today. Naturally, THE THING! We've heard waddies spout words that run eight to the pound about *it,* but we still don't know what THE THING is! Do you?

A fable for the younkers is THE STORY OF BUCKY AN' DAN, which that King of the Cowboys, Roy Rogers, relates. Bucky and Dan were buddies you see, a boy and a hoss that grew up together. They were always pals, for Roy sings touchingly that "a horse has got to watch a boy."

The RCA Victor discmate is a vigorous invitation to RIDE, SON, RIDE. "Hold tight to daddy," Roy warbles, "soon you'll be a man of three." All the small fry who want to be cowboys are going to hogtie themselves a copy of this recording and *clip-clop* along with Roy.

HITCHING POST

Have you latched onto Dude Martin's Mercury recording of THE STRANGE LITTLE GIRL? This bit of country mysticism about the strange girl with "an angel glow in her eyes" is really growing in popularity.

From *Alice In Wonderland,* Mindy Carson and Fran Allison do a 45 r.p.m. single for Victor, the lively song of the March Hare, I'M LATE.

MGM's Hank Williams has a double-barreled biscuit, HOWLIN' AT THE MOON and I CAN'T HELP IT . . . Brush-balladeer Eddy Arnold laments for RCA Victor that he's a MILLION MILES FROM YOUR HEART, until you flip the disc and come up with KENTUCKY WALTZ . . . Farley Holden capably handles the spirited FROM LEXINGTON TO LOUISVILLE and the poignant THE LADY AND THE SOLDIER for Federal . . . King artist Moon Mullican ties onto a melodious tune about a jasper returning home to his mother, whose LAMP OF LIFE IS BURNING LOW. On the coupler he learns that WITHOUT A PORT OF LOVE, a waddy has no place to go.

Alice Faye joins her husband, Phil Harris, in her first record in years, and a humdinger it is as this honey with a cactus heart gives her phiddling Phil the gate. (RCA Victor) . . . "Sam's Song" keeps coming back in new versions, and this time it's a clever sequel that Georgia Gibbs really projects. Her other side for Mercury has the sagebrush sweetie wishing "to hug you six times as much, I WISH, I WISH." . . . Another hit tune is Buddy Morrow's RCA Victor recording of ROSE, ROSE, I LOVE YOU. This was first sung in Chinese by Miss Hue Lee in China. Now it's done up in swingy march tempo, telling about a soldier forced to leave his Malayan sweetheart as his Army unit embarks for home. . . .

MY HEART CRIES FOR YOU, sighs for you, longs for you," breathes Evelyn Knight and Red Foley, dueting favorably for Decca. On the other side, they revive the catchy 'TATER PIE, "I just love that 'tater pie." And you will, dished out by Chef Red Foley.

Guy Lombardo for Decca cuts an expert slicing of FROM THIS MOMENT ON, with Bill Flanagan vocalizing. On the topside of this Decca wax, the ballad from Cole Porter's show, *Out Of This World,* gets a smooth dance rendition.

TIE ME TO YOUR APRON STRINGS AGAIN RCA's Tennessee Plowboy sings straight from his heart to yours, while on the plattermate Eddy Arnold's just another rustic Romeo who started out bashful, but now THERE'S BEEN A CHANGE IN ME.

Thanks for letting us know how you like Hank Williams' wife Audrey's singing, Madeline Williams. And thank you, Mrs. Warren Combs, for telling us that you have almost all of the records we review. I'm sorry you're both too late to get pictures of your favorite singers, but keep reading this column because we're hoping to be making a new offer real soon.

We were tickled pink to read your letter, Vivian Sailer, saying you hope all the other fans enjoy *Record Wrangling* as much as you do.

We sure appreciated your letter, Mrs. R. L. Lindley, and you'll be hearing more —much more—about Hank Snow soon.

And we're mighty glad you liked your pictures, Edna George, and all you others who wrote in. It's sure nice to read the letters you all send in, even if I can't stop to answer every one of them personally.

And now, record pardners, remember that this is your very own column, so keep sending your letters and suggestions to *Record Wrangling,* c/o RANGELAND LOVE STORIES, Popular Publications, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N.Y.

Adios for now, pardners.

TUMBLEWEED BEAU

By Ben T. Young

"Let's not start all that again," she said shakily. "I thought before that we were playing for keeps."

Nell wanted to save her spread and she wanted to save Cole's neck—but most of all she wanted to save her heart from breaking twice.

WHEN Nell McCord rode into Broken Bow that forenoon, she was plumb boogered with trouble. Seeing old Jeff Wilder enjoying the autumn sunshine before the Golden West Hotel, she reined that way and stopped.

"Morning, Sheriff," she said.

"Howdy, ma'am." Wilder touched the brim of his Stetson. "How's the Padlock outfit?"

"Holding a deuce-high hand right now. In the first place, Harley's hurt."

"Bad?"

"No, but he'll be laid up for a while and I need help. Know of someone?"

Wilder gestured toward the deserted hitch-rails lining both sides of the dusty street, and shook his head. "What with Tyson a-gatherin' all over his range, and the little fellers with their shotgun round-up, riders is scarcer'n leaves on a cactus. I don't know of a single man. Whoa, wait. . . . No, never mind."

"What?"

The sheriff stuoied the end of his cigar, looking as embarrassed as a waiter who's spilled the soup. "I was a-goin' to mention Cole Sterett."

Nell's breath caught. As kids she and Cole Sterett had been thicker than quills on a porcupine, and everyone around—including herself—had assumed that they'd someday throw in together. Then, unexpected as a fifth ace, Cole had found himself too tall for the old home roof and had high-tailed off to join Bill Cody's Wild West show. Nell had concluded, along with everyone else, that he was unreliable as a mail-order pistol.

"So Cole's back," she said, feeling a thrill wash over her like a warm wind.

Wilder nodded. "Yonder, at the barber's. Rode in last night. Why he's back here, I dunno, unless to massacre that Rapp Tyson. Jest between you'n me, Nell, that would be no end of a blessin'; but I'd hate to have to jail Cole and mebbe hang him."

"Go fetch, please," she said.

She watched Wilder clump off down the plank walk. In a way she was reluctant to see Cole again. It was plain as paint that he hadn't really cared a whoop for her, and time had sort of dulled the pain she'd felt at his hauling out. Maybe, though, to see him again, would completely obliterate that pain. Maybe she'd find she'd idealized him too much—that he was, after all, just another tall, handsome cowpoke with an infectious grin.

From the tail of her eye she'd been watching the door of the barber shop, and now she saw Cole come out and head toward her. *Steady,* she warned herself, getting very busy arranging her dun pony's forelock.

"Hi, Nell," Cole called, hauling off his hat.

"Hello, Cole." She folded her gloved hands on the saddlehorn, trying to look as cool and remote as Cloud Peak up yonder to the west. "Don't suppose you'd be interested in a temporary job."

Sober-faced now, he wagged his head. "I came back to do a job, but I hope it's goin' to be permanent."

A little shiver shook Nell. Sure as sun-up Sheriff Wilder was right. Cole was back to settle things with Tyson. Perhaps, if she could get him out to Padlock, he might be prevailed upon to forget Tyson and pull foot again. But that wasn't likely. The sight of the old Sterett home—now Tyson's—right across the creek from hers would be like a wind on hot embers; and the minute Tyson came back from the roundup, hell would be out of its shuck. Still, Tyson's Diamond T wagon was down on Crazy Woman now, and before the gather and the drive to the railroad were completed, she'd have time to reason with Cole.

"Well, anyhow," she said. "Come on out and see us. The Horns are still there and—"

"Wilder says Harley's hurt."

She nodded. "Stove up some. Getting too old to ride anything but a plumb friendly horse. But Edna can still make those bull-berry pies."

"That does it," Cole grinned. "Light and rest here a minute while I gather up my war-bag and ponies."

Seating herself on the porch railing, she

watched him high-heel into the hotel and out again, and down the street to the livery barn. *He hasn't changed,* she thought dolefully, already in the same turmoil his nearness had always aroused. He was still clean and neat; and while his get-up was of better quality than he'd been able to afford when working for his dad, it wasn't gaudy. Nor did he seem to have got vain because he'd been taken to England as one of Buffalo Bill's top riders and ropers. He was just the same lovable jigger he'd always been—lovable, but apparently too unstable to tie to. Nell let out a big sigh.

HE REAPPEARED shortly, riding a high-stepping sorrel and leading a roan bed-horse. "I'm sorry 'bout your pa sackin' his saddle," he said when they'd started. "Didn't hear of it till long after, and thought it was no good to write then."

"I'm sorry about your dad, too." She hated to mention it. It was a touchy subject, for folks said that Cole's leaving had so disheartened old Fred Sterett that he was easy picking for a hard-as-a-horseshoe buzzard like Rapp Tyson. The loss of his spread had killed Fred Sterett; and everyone felt that Cole was, in a way, responsible.

For a long moment the silence was heavy as wet hay; no sounds save for the creak of leather and the snuffling of the led roan as kicked-up dust tickled his nostrils. Then Cole said, "Still runnin' horses, I s'pose?"

She nodded, not feeling like mentioning the struggle she'd had during the previous hard winter. The crusted snow had been so deep that even horses couldn't paw their way down to the dried grass, and she'd had to borrow money to buy feed.

"I'm shaping up a bunch of four- to eight-year-old geldings right now," she said. "A Captain Graham, an Army quartermaster from Fort Robinson, will be around these parts in a day or so, buying troop horses and officers' mounts; and I hope to make some sales. That's why I need help right now, to keep them in ace-high condition and to trail those I sell to the railroad."

"How many you got that'll meet specifications?"

"Thirty head. But now that the Indians are on reservations, the cavalry doesn't use horses up so fast and are buying more carefully. I understand they're not taking more than one in every four offered, so it's likely I'll be lucky to have as many as eight accepted."

"At how much?"

"A hundred sixty-five is the average paid."

"Maybe thirteen hundred, eh? Not bad."

It wasn't good, either; not enough by a heck of a sight to carry her through the winter and pay the taxes and the interest on the loan from the bank. And the interest had to be paid—and right soon, too—lest the bank foreclose and she'd lose acres of her best grassland to Tyson. Somewhere, somehow, she'd have to get more money.

They'd been pushing back the three miles to her bailiwick at a fast walk, so it wasn't long till they turned into the ranch yard.

Harley Horn saw them from his chair on the sunny porch. "Great smokin' hell-fire!" he yelled. "Hi, Cole, you ol' bunch-quitter. Glad to see you!"

"Same to you, ol' smooth-bore!" Cole grinned, stepping down. Then he turned his eyes on the plump, white-haired woman who appeared in the doorway. "Edna, ma'am," he said, touching his hat. "If I were a marryin' man, and you were single—"

"Still got that medicine tongue, ain't you?" she cut in, looking pleased as a kid pulling a pup's ears.

Watching from the hitch-rail against which she leaned, Nell felt her spirits lift. The Horns liked Cole and he liked them; and their influence would be a valuable aid in her attempt to show him the folly of tangling with Tyson.

Then, up from the creek-crossing, rode Rapp Tyson himself, welcome as a buzz-tail snake at a picnic. . . .

TYSON was a big hombre, rough as the road to Buffalo. He threw a glance at the porch, then turned his pale blue eyes on Nell—eyes that had the cold bleak stare of gun muzzles. By that time Nell had swallowed the dryness in her throat and could manage to speak.

"I thought you were with your wagon," she said.

"Home on an errand. Heard Horn was hurt. I'll send a man."

Nell was nervously watching Cole. Though his face was grim as that of a trapper skinning a skunk, he obviously didn't intend to make trouble now

"Thanks, but don't bother," she said to Tyson. "I found a hand."

"A circus rider?"

Nell and Edna gasped, Harley cussed and Cole was beside Tyson in two strides. "Listen, you onion-eyed—"

"Please, both of you!" Nell grasped Cole's arm and glared up at Tyson. "I'm sorry, but you'd better go," she told him.

"I'm sorry too, sister," Tyson said with his prussic-acid smile. "I expected a little more gratitude from you. Just remember that when the roads were blocked last winter and you couldn't haul feed out from town, I let you have all you needed."

"I paid for it!"

Tyson nodded. "With money that you wouldn't have had if, as a director of the bank, I hadn't seen to it that your loan was approved. Now when I come to offer more help, you treat me like this!"

"Aw, hobble your jaw," Harley called, shaking his cane. "You done all them things jest to corner her into marryin' you."

Nell's face went red as a brush-fire. "Hush, Harley!"

"I won't hush! One way or t'other he aims to git this here Padlock jest like he tied onto Fred Sterett's place."

As Edna choked him off, Tyson loosed a gravelly laugh, lifted his reins and rode away.

When his big skewbald had splashed back through the stream, Cole broke the awkward silence. "I just now got more information thrun's in a mail-order wish-book," he said, turning toward his ponies at the hitch-rail. "Reckon I'd better get me some chips in this game. Shall I put up this dun for you, Nell?"

"I'll go along," she told him, swinging into her saddle; and as she followed him to the corral she wondered where all this would end.

Inside the corral she quickly stripped off the dun's gear and carried it into the saddle-room of the barn. Turning, she found herself in Cole's arms. He didn't say anything, just crushed her to him as his lips found hers.

For a long moment all thoughts were gone from her mind. Then a little cry came out of her and she pulled free. "Let's not start all that again," she said shakily. "I thought before that we were playing for keeps, but—"

Clang! went the bell outside the kitchen door. Dinner was on.

In spite of the fact that the food had been nearly ready before the scene with Tyson, it was still a good meal. But everyone was busy with his own worries, and not much was said. Even Cole, usually chipper as a coopful of catbirds, was silent.

Nell had all three of them to look after, she thought morosely. The Horns had been on Padlock since the start, and should she go broke now, they'd be homeless as dried tumbleweeds and too old to find work easily elsewhere. Too, she must somehow keep Cole away from Tyson or they'd tangle in a bull-size ruckus and Cole would wind up in jail or the graveyard. But how to iron out all these troubles was more than a small redhead just rising twenty should be expected to figure out.

OF COURSE, she could save the Horns and herself by accepting Rapp Tyson's standing offer of marriage. But the Horns would raise yelling-hell at the mere men-

tion of such a thing, and she herself would rather be dead than tied to the big scaly moose. Nor would Cole be saved by such a move. *Oh, great lord,* she groaned inwardly, rising with the rest when the meal was finished.

"What's to be done first?" Cole asked her, taking his hat from the deerfoot rack beside the kitchen door.

"Well—" She led the way onto the stoop. "We had to gather in most every horse on the place to get the ones I wanted. The pick are in the big corral, being grained twice a day. The others, which have to be turned loose again, are still in that pasture. See that big piebald yonder by the cottonwood? They're all down there."

"Keno," Cole said, bowlegging off toward the barn.

"And, by the way," she called, "there are some albinos in that bunch. Look them over, will you? Something just occurred to me."

When she went back inside again, Harley asked, "He back for good?"

She shrugged. "Don't know what his plans are, but it's my guess—and Sheriff Wilder's, too—that he came with no more on his mind than a showdown with Rapp Tyson. As if that would do any good now! We must prevent it, if possible."

"My land, yes," Edna said, looking up from the dishpan.

"If that's all he come fer, I'd most ruther he'd a-stayed in North Platte and wintered with the circus." Harley sighed, gingerly shifting his damaged leg. "Wonder if he's saved any money."

"Ha," Edna scoffed. "Did anybody ever hear of a cowpoke savin' money? Savin' just don't seem to occur to them."

"No, not the average cowpoke, anyhow. But in spite of that go-to-hell look Cole's got, and what folks say about him, I think the boy's level-headed. And I hear Bill Cody pays good wages, even to ol' Sittin' Bull and them other Injuns that just dress up to make the show look colorful."

"Huh!" Edna was chunking cutlery into a drawer. "Cole's lovable as a collie pup, but I doubt if you're right about what goes on inside that handsome head. A man with any sense would never ride broncs for a livin', nor would he go off and leave a pert filly like Nell, here."

But the pert filly could stand no more. Stepping into her room, she closed the door and flung herself facedown on the bed. She wasn't the crying kind. Far from it. But when a gal's crowded on all sides by more grief than could be rammed into a freight wagon, she has good cause to mope. She wanted Cole for keeps; she wanted to keep every acre of Padlock, too; but it seemed as though she had no more chance of doing either than a sagehen in a coyote's mouth has of surviving. "Damn!" she said through her teeth.

Mentally backtracking over the trail, she came to the boggy place where her financial troubles had started. It was her dad's long illness, with medical expenses and finally the funeral. The market for horses hadn't been good, either. After this anticipated sale to the Army, she couldn't expect much more before Spring—unless, by some remote chance, those albinos. . .

Her thoughts turned to that kiss in the saddle-shed. The touch of Cole's lips, the feel of his arms about her, still had the power to set her aflame like a dry haystack; but she knew now that his kisses meant no more than—just kisses. Come next grass, he'd be back with Bill Cody again, wasting his best years and risking his life for a few hours of daily glory in a street parade and canvas-enclosed arena.

Forget him, she told herself, getting up to bathe her face and tidy her hair. *He's not worth one white chip.*

Through the open window she could now hear him splitting cottonwood chunks for the cookstove. From the kitchen came a bustling clatter as Edna prepared to create one of his favorite bull-berry pies. Nell decided to visit the long-unused bunkhouse

to make sure it was in shape for his brief occupancy. Then it would be time to start measuring out the barley and forking down hay for the corralled candidates for Army service.

She did hope that quartermaster would show up tomorrow, for even if he accepted some of her horses she'd not get her check till they were delivered at the railroad shipping-pen, maybe two days later. And every day counted now, with that interest date almost here.

Suddenly, above the domestic sounds and the gurgle of the boulder-choked creek, she heard the scolding of disturbed whiskey-jacks in the wild-plum thicket beside the crossing. She looked out. Her heart gave one great horrified lurch, than began pounding like the drumming hoofs of a stampeded horse. Here, again, came Rapp Tyson; and Cole was out there with an axe.

MOVING as fast as a prairie-dog hunting cover, she headed for the porch. Fortunately, Harley had managed to hobble out to the woodpile. He was talking to Cole, and Nell hoped he could restrain the hot-headed cowboy.

She didn't have long to think about it, for Tyson was already riding up to the house. "Hello, Rapp," she said through stiff lips and with lowered voice. "Are you really *hunting* trouble?"

Hauling up, he stepped from his saddle and left the horse ground-tied. "I don't run my bootheels over sidestepping trouble," he said, hunkering down on the step and lighting a cigar. "But I'm not hunting it, either. I came to talk."

"About what?"

"Us. You're up against a knot, Nell. Marry me and quit struggling."

"No." She shook her head. "And that's final."

"But just look at the cards," he persisted. "You owe the bank, and stand to lose the best pasture-land you've got."

"I'll pay the interest when it's due."

"With what? You haven't enough of a balance in the bank to buy a drink."

Right then she really got ringy. "Look!" she flared. "Just because you blew in here from Texas—"

"Arizona," he corrected.

"Well, you talk like a Texan, anyhow. But just because you came with a roll big as a wagon-hub and corralled enough bank stock to become a director, that doesn't give you leave to go snooping in everybody's affairs. How I'll manage to pay that interest is none of your business."

Tyson shrugged his heavy shoulders; and as he studied the ash on his cigar, his thin lips twitched. Though Nell was mad enough to tromp on little chickens, she was sorry she'd raised her voice. Smelling trouble, Cole and Harley were now approaching.

A cool one, that Tyson; for if he heard them he didn't let on. "I meant to tell you this noon," he drawled, "but that saddle-bum started rattling his horns and the real purpose of my errand slipped my mind."

"You meant to tell me what?"

"That Graham, the quartermaster, isn't coming till sometime next week—too late to save your hide."

Her insides felt as though a couple of coyotes were doing a square-dance there. "Why not? It was understood—"

"I know." Tyson paid no heed as Cole appeared, looking like a bobcat about to spring, and Harley stopped to lean against the log wall of the house.

"But," Tyson continued, "when I heard that Graham was on the TV spread, I drifted over and told him that if I had a week to get the steers off my hands, I could show him some top-notch saddle-stock myself. So he said he'd go on up around Big Horn and Sheridan and be down here later. Trouble is, those English outfits at Big Horn are belt-deep in fine horses, so by the time he gets here he may need only a few more and be mighty choosey."

His scheme was as flimsy as a bride's veil, and it made Nell so choked with fury

that she couldn't speak. She stood grinding her nails into the porch-post beside her. Now she almost wished that Cole would leap on Tyson and mangle him. But, strangely enough, the cowboy seemed calm as a millpond as he shaped and fired a smoke.

It was Harley who broke the silence, with words that came out of his throat like sandpaper. "Tyson," he said, "you're the biggest snake I ever seen without the aid o' likker!"

"Well, I'll pull his fangs, you bet!" Nell stormed. "Cole, will you please slap a saddle on that bay in the corral? I'm going after that quartermaster!"

Cole shook his head. "It's the shank of the afternoon and thirty miles to go. Better leave me do it. I'll have your buyer here tomorrow."

"He's got his plans all made." Tyson grinned.

"I reckon he'll change 'em, when he hears the straight of this."

"You s'pose he'll take your word against mine? You talk big for a drifter."

"It just happens that my driftin' around has given me the top card in this deal." Cole's voice was still soft and low, but now it had an edge on it. "When the show closed for the season at North Platte, the manager paid some of us boys who were comin' this way to side a dozen or so Sioux Indians back to the Pine Ridge Agency. This Captain Graham was up there about rations, and I met him. I think he'll listen to what I say."

Nell urged, "For goodness sake get going, then!"

Again Cole shook his head. "Not till I've said a few words about our friend, here."

"Sort of a funeral sermon, mebbe?" Harley asked hopefully. "One o' them eulogy things?"

"Not a eulogy, Harley. The petrified truth. While I was with the show, I pardnered round with a Texas boy from Laredo; and when word came how my dad had been euchred out of his ranch, I mentioned it to this boy and described the fly-blown whelp who'd done it. This boy recalled a jasper with just those earmarks who'd been known along the Rio Grande as— Don't move, brother! Keep your hand away from inside your shirt."

Though Cole had appeared to pack no gun, one was suddenly in his fist, leveled in the right direction. Looking uncomfortable as a steer facing a butcher with a meat-axe, Tyson stayed put.

"Duren's the name, mister," Cole continued. "Ike Duran, who still has a Mexican wife across the river in Neuvo Laredo, and who's wanted by the authorities over there for the robbery and murder of a well-heeled *ranchero*."

"Great snakes!" Edna gasped in the doorway.

Harley's sun-puckered eyes were standing out on stems; and Nell had a strained, pulled-tight feeling, like a wire was drawn taut inside her.

"You've got your spurs tangled, Sterett." The big ranchman's voice sounded as though it came from down a well. "You're just sore because your old man—"

"Sure, I'm sore! But what you did was within the law—though crowdin' the shady side—so I didn't come home to get my tail in a crack by killin' you, as I guess some folks thought. I didn't intend to pay you any heed a-tall, but things changed when I saw you a-pesterin' these folks."

"That any of your business?"

"Yes. They're my friends, and—" Cole broke off as the nearby ground-tied horse suddenly shook himself with a great rattle of gear. Cole flicked a glance that way. His gun wavered.

But just as Duran's hand darted inside his shirt, Edna stepped out with a cocked shotgun.

"Hold it, Texas!" she ordered, her gun covering him like a carpet. "Reach up and leave Harley take that hardware off you.

And no monkey shines, either. Buckshot leaves a mean and oozy corpse. Got it, Harley?"

Harley grunted.

"I ain't been pickin' wild flowers." Flipping out the cylinder, Harley dumped the loads and tossed the Colt into the dried hollyhocks along the wall.

"Thanks, Edna," Cole said, putting up his own gun. "Now, Duran, pull your arms down. You look plumb silly thataway. And if I were in your boots, I'd split the breeze for Canada as if the heel-flies were after me. By this time that Laredo boy's back home, and I don't reckon it'll be long before the Mexican government has asked Uncle Sam to put a U. S. marshal on your trail."

FOR a long moment it was quiet as the inside of an abandoned mine. *He has no out. What's he waiting for?* Nell wondered impatiently. Then, when Tyson started for his horse, she loosed a sigh of relief. At least part of her troubles were disappearing like snow before a chinook.

But Judas! Right before Cole, Duran had stopped. "You've still got a gun, Sterett, and I haven't," he growled. "Otherwise I'd kill you."

"Help yourself, pardner." Drawing the Colt from the waistband of his pants, Cole sidestepped and handed it to Harley.

"No, Cole!" Nell started toward him.

"Leave 'em be," Harley said gruffly, blocking her way. "Edna, put that shotgun inside. Now, boy, knock the hell out o' the skunk!"

With the speed of a steel trap, Duran had produced a stubby derringer from somewhere. But even as it blasted at Cole, the cowboy dived under the big slug and grabbed Duran's knees. Down they went like a landslide, almost under the dancing feet of the terrified horse.

Nell leaped, grabbed the reins, and hauled the gelding aside. Then the second barrel of the mean little gun let go, and she whirled.

But Cole, by thunder, was still alive and doing well—though he was torn, dirty and hatless, and looked like a man who'd been there and back. Astride the snarling sidewinder, he was savagely beating his head with both fists.

"No, Cole!" Springing forward, Nell grasped his shoulders. "There's nothing to be gained by more of that! Please!"

Like a man coming out of a hypnotic

Love Once and Learn That

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By BLAKE REED

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spell, Cole stared up into her pleading eyes. The look of blind fury slowly drained out of his sweating face. Suddenly he grinned and got up. "Guess you're right. He'll hang someday, anyhow."

With all the earmarks of a jasper who'd tangled with a bear, Duran got to his feet, staggered to his horse and swung aboard. But instead of turning toward the creek-crossing to go home, he moved off in the opposite direction.

Slouched like a half-empty sack, Duran jogged along till opposite the barn. Then, abruptly straightening, he started hell-bent for the small corral where the four ponies were penned. Leaning from the saddle, he opened the gate and charged in.

"He's loco!" Nell started to run. "Cole, look!"

Cussing like a rusty windmill, Cole got his gun from Harley and overtook her. Duran was in the big corral now. He had the far-side gate open, and was hazing the thirty selected geldings through it.

With manes and tails flying, they were pouring through the gate like coffee spilling out of a torn bag—making far-apart tracks toward the Powder River breaks. Then, apparently satisfied, Duran quit following and lined out for the creek and his own spread—still going like a spooked prong-horn.

"Damn his rancid carcass, anyhow," Cole panted, stopping short.

Stunned like ducks in thunder, Nell stopped, too. That had been just pure child-ish cussedness, useless as an alarm clock in a cemetery.

But he sure had put another worm in her applesauce. Every horse on Padlock was on the loose. Nell would have to dab a loop on something to ride, then spend two or three days corralling the salable geldings again. And time was getting shorter than the tailhold on a rabbit.

"Where're you going?" she asked as Cole started off toward the barn.

"To tie onto one of those ponies in the pasture," he flung back over his shoulder.

"Why—" Hurriedly she overtook him. "Didn't you turn them out?"

Grinning again, he grasped her arm and marched her along. "Like you told me, I took a squint at those albinos—and the pin-tos, too. Then I left them right where they were. Lucky I did, because now it won't take long to wrangle those bays and blacks again. Fact is, there's a good chance that they'll *come* back; so long as you've been grainin' 'em. Then I'll light a shuck for Big Horn to find Graham."

"But those albinos!" Nell persisted, fol-lowing him into the saddle-room where he'd gone for his rope. "My idea was that may-be Colonel Cody would—"

"And I think you're right," he cut in. "He's always on the lookout for showy horses, whites for that mounted band he sets such store by, and paints for his riders. I'll write and ask him to send his horse-buyer."

"That's fine, Cole! Maybe then I can get clear out of debt. But even though you've choused that rabid loco out of these parts, my troubles aren't over. Right quick I've got to have money to pay the interest on the bank loan, and if Captain Graham doesn't get here in the next day or so and buy those geldings—"

"Look." From the pocket of his torn shirt, Cole proudly drew a bank-book. "Savings. Plenty of money and six bits over. Don't fret any more."

"But, Cole, I couldn't take your money."

"You could take it from your husband, couldn't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then stop worrying." He grasped her shoulders. "Nell, I mentioned this morning that I'd come back to do a job. What I meant was—a job of makin' you happy. If you'll just forget what a brass-bound fool I've been, and marry me."

With a little cry she went into his arms

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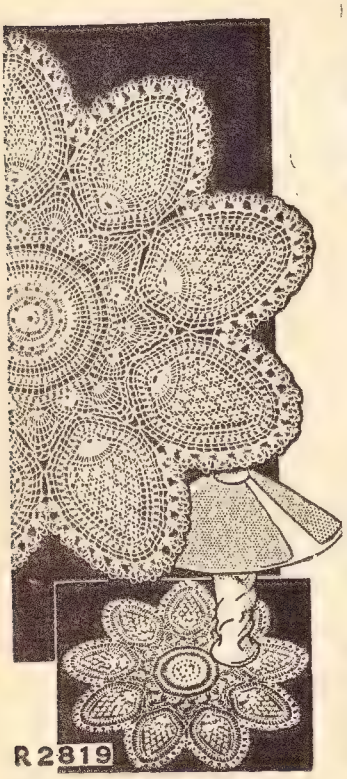

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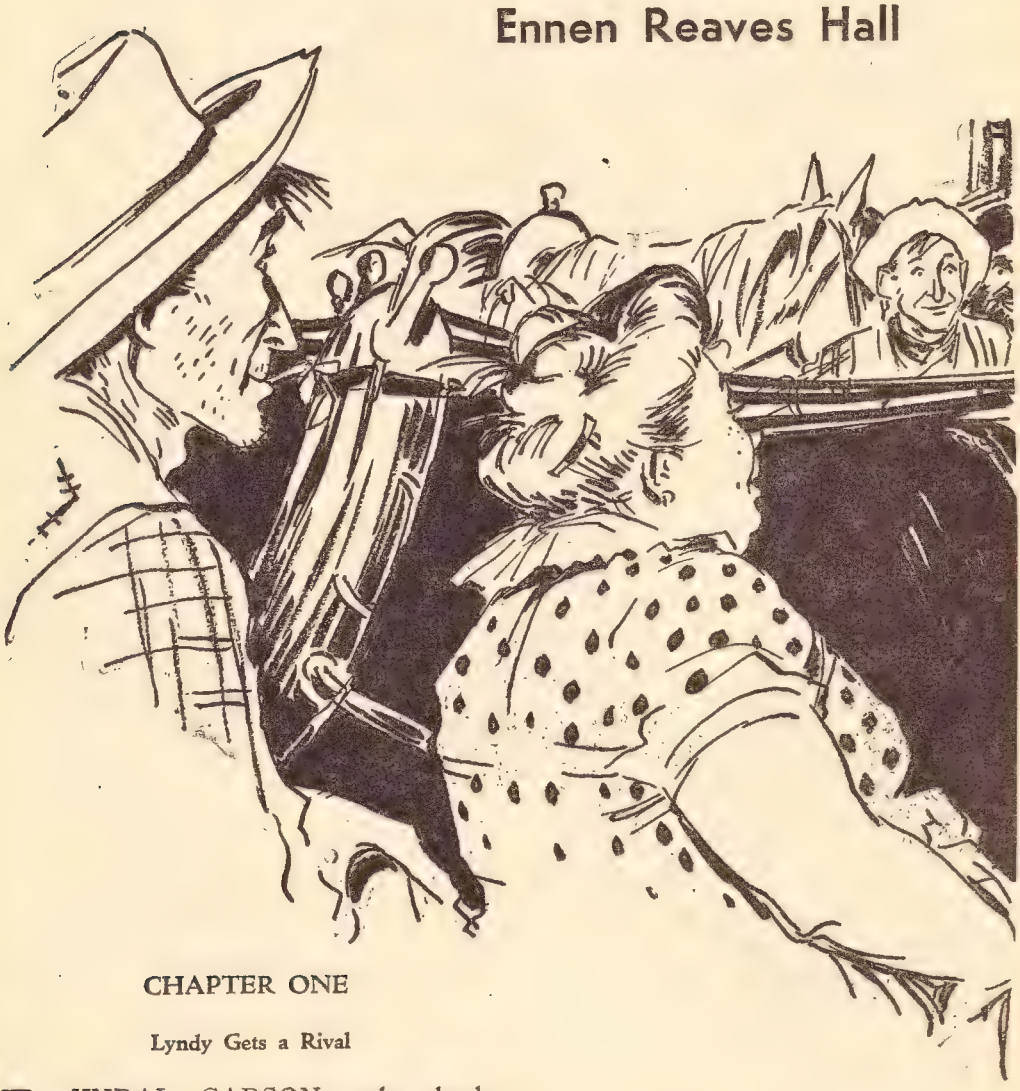
By Ennen Reaves Hall



Sparkling Old-West Novelette

CHAPTER ONE

Lyndy Gets a Rival

LYNDAL GARSON rode slowly through the crowded street of Post-oak, marveling anew at what had happened to change the quiet little valley town overnight into this hustling, bustling mushroom city.

More than ever, Lyndal hated everything she saw—the loaded wagons driven by men

He said, "Some of these days we'll be riding in to see the preacher."

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Darling of Double-Cross Range

whose impatient curses filled the air, the brown tent buildings that dotted the valley floor like prairie toadstools, the strange men, with here and there a sprinkling of women, whose clothes tagged them as Eastern adventurers and gold seekers. Black-gold seekers, who had heard the magic word oil and flocked like vultures to the scene of a possible killing. The very air, Lyndal thought, reeked with the smell of avarice and greed—and she hated it all.

Reining her pony in at the hitchrack in front of the general store and post office, Lyndal slid from the saddle and looped the reins about the post. A team of big, black mules hitched to a wagon shied nervously at sight of her and jerked on the check rope that held them securely hitched.

Lyndal knew those mules. They belonged to Truman Hays, a valley rancher. They were as skittish as young colts and had the black disposition of the devil. Lyndal stooped and passed under the neck of her horse to avoid going too close to the Hays wagon. Those mules had wicked hoofs.

Ten minutes later she came out of the building and stood, indecisively, wondering if maybe Lance Burnet was in town. She longed with all her heart to see him—but not if he was with Dolly Mansure, as he had been so often lately.

A hush so sudden that it seemed louder than noise fell over the jostling throng near by. Lyndal looked up in surprise. A gasp rose in her throat as she saw what the others were looking at—a toddling child at the very heels of Hays' skittish mules!

A man swore softly, another groaned, as the voice of Truman Hays cut the horrified silence:

"Anybody makes a move toward those mules right now and they'll kick kingdom come out of that kid. Somebody call him quiet like."

In a voice half strangled with fear, the child's mother called and implored. But the baby didn't turn back. Instead he crawled under the trace chains, close enough to the mules to touch their sensitive flanks. The near animal stood with turned head and pointed ears, and Lyndal could see the ripple of nerves throughout his tensed body. The mother's voice rose hysterically.

Hays implored, "Don't yell, ma'am. That's all that's needed to set that mule off like a firecracker."

Cautiously, but quickly, a man made his way through the helpless crowd until he could pass, unseen by the mules, and come up behind the Hays wagon. At sight of him relief flowed through Lyndal. He wouldn't stand helplessly by and see a child kicked to death!

While the crowd held their breath in an agony of suspense, Lance Burnet climbed over the end gate of the wagon. His lithe, lean body moved with the quickness and lightness of a cat, careful to let no sound betray his presence to the mules. Lyndal thought he was taking an eternity of time and prayed silently. "Hurry, hurry, Lance!" But she knew it was only a matter of seconds. For the tensed mules had not moved when Lance crawled under the seat and raised himself cautiously until he looked down directly above the baby.

Bare-headed, his auburn hair glistening like bronze in the sun, Lance lowered his body cautiously, reaching toward the child. But his reach wasn't near long enough. A groan that was only a soft sigh swept through the watchers. Lance eased his body further over until he was virtually suspended in air, only one hand and braced knees supporting him.

Then Lyndal grabbed her throat in time to stifle the scream that rose in it. That near mule must have caught some slight movement behind him. His ears twitched; his muscles rippled like angry black waves. He was plainly bunching for the kick. And Lance Burnet's head was in easy reach of those hard hoofs. Lyndal tried to shut her eyes and found she couldn't. Found they were glued to that bronzed head dangling so precariously—to that slow-moving,

cautious arm reaching for the young child.

THEN the arm wasn't slow-moving any more. As quick as the dart of a snake, it had grabbed the collar of the child and jerked upward. For one split second it looked like Lance would not regain his balance in time and both man and child would fall to their death. But the man's feet hit the wagon bed and the child cleared the top—in the same instant that the crash of hoofs against the wagon gear shattered the tense silence.

Truman Hays sprang to the heads of his ugly team. The crowd expressed their relief in a roar of applause.

Lyndal was close by when Lance delivered the child to the tearful mother. He said, grinning broadly. "Teach him to stay away from the hind quarters of a mule."

Pressing close, Lyndal put a hand on his sleeve. "Lance," she was still breathless, "that was wonderful! But I was horribly frightened."

His hand closed down on hers, sending a warm, sweet tingle all through her. "Don't tell anybody, but so was I, Lyndy. I wish Tru would teach his mules to be more friendly."

Drawing her to one side he asked, "And what do you think of the big city of Postoak now?"

Lyndal's brown eyes darkened to an opaque black as she looked about. "I don't like it, Lance. It seems wrong, somehow. What are all these people here for?"

He laughed softly, his eyes suddenly gleaming with excitement. "To get rich, of course. It's a gold rush, only it's for liquid gold. If we can bring in another well or two like this first one, we'll be rich."

"We?" Lyndal searched his face anxiously, not liking what she saw there. "Lance, what do you mean by 'we'? That well is a good five miles from your ranch."

"That don't mean there couldn't be oil on the Silver Spur. Lyndy, how would you like to marry a big oil magnate and go take in all the sights of the East on your honeymoon?"

"I'd much rather marry a good rancher and stay on the Silver Spur." Her voice was sharp and it brought a frown to his good-humored face. "Lance, I crossed your range coming in. Where are all your Herefords? I didn't see over fifty head."

"I haven't got over fifty head," he said bluntly. "Sold off last week, Lyndy. That's what I'm trying to tell you. I'm going into the oil business. Ranching's too slow for these times. The big money's under the ground, not on top."

Lyndal felt sick. "But, Lance, you *know* ranching. You had the start of a fine herd. But you don't know anything at all about the oil business."

"But I've got a partner who knows all about it, Lyndy. All he needs is capital."

Premonition struck Lyndal like a blow. "Not that Joe Mansure?" she broke in. "Lance, you're not going in with him?"

"Why not?" He was getting edgy and impatient. "I know you don't like him, Lyndy, but you don't know a thing against him—except that you don't like his daughter."

"No," she said quietly. "I don't like Dolly Mansure. But you're making it mighty plain you do, Lance. The whole valley's talking about you and her."

"Let them talk," he said, nearer anger than she had ever seen him. "She's just a lonesome kid without her mother and I'm trying to be nice to her. Which is more than anybody else has been."

"She hasn't shown any interest in anyone else." All Lyndal's bitter hurt was in her voice. "As soon as she got here she started to stampede you—"

"I haven't been stampeded," he said, "and I don't aim to be. Neither do I aim to be a common cow wrangler all my life, Lyndy. If that doesn't suit you—"

"It doesn't suit me, Lance!" Lyndal was breathing fast her heart pounding painfully against her ribs. "You'll have to give

up your get-rich-quick ideas or give up me."

Thoroughly frightened at what she had said and still more frightened at the answer she saw in Lance's eyes, she turned quickly and ran to her horse. She was fumbling almost blindly with the hitch strap when she heard his step beside her, felt his arms go about her and draw her close.

"You can't mean that, Lyndy," he whispered against her raven's wing hair. "You'll see it my way if we strike it rich. I'm sure you will."

He bent his head then and kissed her, quick and hard. His lips were warm and sweet and tender. But Lyndal was left with a strange feeling of disappointment. As though she had been offered food, only to have it snatched away before she had fully tasted it. Could that Dolly Mansure be coming between them?"

As though her thoughts had conjured Dolly out of thin air, Dolly Mansure's silver-bell voice tore them hastily apart. Looking up, they saw her sitting in the showy equipage she drove—a red-topped surrey drawn by high-stepping, matched grays.

Yet even in that moment of resentment, Lyndal reflected grudgingly that a man could hardly be blamed for finding the Eastern girl attractive. She was a picture of blonde loveliness.

Dolly was saying, her face and voice full of amusement, "So this is why you've kept me waiting, Lance. I ought to be angry—only one doesn't get angry with a hero. Did you know everybody's talking about you? You're famous!"

Lance looked from blonde to brunette, his face miserable with embarrassment. "We were driving out to the well," he muttered apologetically to Lyndal. "We were just going to look around . . ."

Biting her lips to stop their trembling, Lyndal swung up into her saddle. "Don't let me keep you," she said coldly. "By all means, get on your way!"

CHAPTER TWO

High Spirited

MISS LUCINDA WALTERS was quick to notice her niece's distraction that evening. "What's bothering you, gal?" she asked in her brusk way. "You ain't said a word since you got home. You and Lance having trouble?"

Lyndal moved restlessly across the kitchen before answering. "Lance is a fool, Aunt Cindy. He's sold most of his fine stock so he can throw in with that Joe Mansure and get rich quick on oil."

"All men are fools," Aunt Cindy said promptly. "And most women are bigger ones. Hope you didn't tell Lance just what you thought."

"Of course I did. Why wouldn't I, Aunt Cindy? I don't trust that Joe Mansure. He'll get Lance in trouble sure."

"Did you convince Lance of that?" Aunt Cindy's voice was dry.

Lyndal flushed. "Well, no. He was stubborn and all worked up over the idea of big money."

"Ideas like that get most everybody worked up at times. Thing that surprises me, Lyndy, is you a-tryin' to reason with Lance when he's that way. No smart woman tries to out-talk a man when he's drunk—whether it's on likker, love or gold fever."

Lyndal's strained nerves snapped. "And no right-thinking woman keeps quiet and sees her man ruin himself without trying to stop him! Maybe there's some things you don't understand, Aunt Cindy."

"Meaning I can't know so much about men since I never roped one for myself? Don't you know yet, Lyndy, that the only sure way to learn is by making mistakes? I'd hate to see you follow a blind trail and end up like me."

That was quite an admission from Miss Lucinda Walters, who had always maintained perfect satisfaction with her un-

married state. Lyndal's anger melted quickly and she ran to throw her arms about her aunt.

"I'm just a cat, Aunt Cindy. And I only hope I end up half as nice as you. Only I think you're wrong about Lance and me. I'll cure him of his gold colic."

Miss Lucinda shrugged. "All right, Lyndy. But I tried curing a man of drinking once. Instead, I cured him of me. You be careful you don't make things easier for Dolly Mansure and her pa. Now, set the table for me. Here's your pa ready to eat."

"Ready to drink, you mean." Lyndal laughed a little as she hurried to the cupboard. "Too bad somebody didn't cure Pop of his bottle."

Dan Garson had come in and heard her last words. "It's been tried, Lyndy," he said dryly. "But to prove it didn't work, just reach me down that bottle from up there."

Lyndal looked after her father thoughtfully as he left the room, bottle in hand. "You know, Aunt Cindy, I can't remember a night since Mother died that Pop hasn't asked for whiskey. And I can't remember ever seeing him drunk."

"That's because he never lets the bottle get empty," Lucinda said enigmatically. "But as a matter of fact, Lyndy, your pa stays drunk all the time. Drunk on a stubborn idee, and there ain't no likker drunk any worse than that."

Lyndal looked at her curiously but asked no more questions. When Lucinda Walters set her lips that way she was through talking. . . .

Two days passed and no word from Lance. Finally Lyndal could stand it no longer and found an excuse for riding into town.

An hour later, pushing her pony through the crowded street of Postoak, Lyndal jerked him to a sharp stop, staring unbelievingly. A big sign met her eyes like a blow, blazing across the front of a new tent-roof shack in letters a full foot high:

SILVER SPUR OIL CO.
LANCE BURNET, PRESIDENT
CAPITAL STOCK $50,000

So that was Lance's answer to her! Desolation such as she had never known flooded Lyndal's heart, and all the warmth and brightness went out of the Oklahoma sunshine. She had lost—and Dolly Mansure had won.

As though to emphasize the fullness of her defeat, a bright-topped surrey flashed past, the matched grays lifting polished hoofs high. And in the surrey sat Dolly and Lance, so absorbed in talk and laughter they never noticed Lyndal.

The surrey stopped before the flimsy office building and Dolly got out, carefully helped by Lance. The blonde girl went inside while Lance got back in and drove off toward the livery barn.

The coldness and bleakness in Lyndal's heart was suddenly swept away in a tempest of anger that shook her violently. Reining her horse to a hitchrack near by, she slid from the saddle, looped the lines quickly and went boldly toward the new shack. She would tell this Dolly Mansure a few things.

AT THE very door she stopped, a measure of sanity returning. Tell Dolly what? That she had done what Lyndal Garson couldn't do—stampede Lance Burnet? That even the threat of losing Lyndal hadn't mattered to Lance?

She hesitated. She had started to turn away when from inside Dolly's clear voice reached her, high, exultant: "Another week Joe, and we'll have all we need and—"

"Careful, kid," Joe Mansure warned, as a step sounded behind Lyndal.

An old cattleman she knew pushed past hurriedly and, curious, Lyndal followed him inside.

Dolly, Lyndal's quick eyes noted, was

moving hastily away from the side of Joe Mansure. Lyndal had a definite sense of confusion on their part. Dolly plainly had the look of a girl surprised in the act of kissing. But why? A girl could kiss her father without apology.

Then Lyndal became interested in what old Jim Longacre was saying as he took out a worn wallet. "Told Lance to save me a bunch of this oil stock of his'n. What's good enough for Lance Burnet's good enough for me. Reckon all his friends will feel that way."

He counted out bills with trembling old fingers. "Got a thousand dollars here, all my life savings. I'm putting it all in Silver Spur stock."

Joe Mansure's eyes glittered as he picked up the bills and pocketed them before making out the ornate certificates. "You're being smart, old man," he said.

And something in his face and voice sent a cold shiver through Lyndal. Then she rebuked herself firmly. Wasn't she letting her imagination—and her jealousy—run away with her?

Another rancher hurried in. This one had a question to ask before he turned loose of his money. Just one: "Lance Burnet guarantee you'll drill?"

"Sure thing," Mansure answered easily. "It's right there on the stock certificate. His personal guarantee signed by him. Of course we can't guarantee a gusher like the Tyson well. That's a chance we have to take."

"I'll take that chance," the rancher said. "I don't mind gambling a little but I want to know I won't be dealt from the bottom of the deck. If Lance is doing the dealing, I know I won't."

Sick with apprehension, her mind a confused blur of questions, Lyndal slipped back outside. Was Lance doing the dealing? That was the doubt tormenting her.

At the door she met Lance face to face. Taking her arm, he drew her outside, his eyes guarded, a little defiant. "Well, here it is, Lyndal. The Silver Spur Oil Company. How does it sound?"

"Sounds like crowbait to me." Lyndal's voice was more brisk than she had meant it to be. "Lance, did you know your friends and putting money into this because they've got faith in you? Suppose they lose it all? Old Jim Longacre would be ruined."

Lance flushed but his eyes didn't drop before hers. "And suppose we strike oil? We'd all be rich and old Jim can spend his last days in luxury. Isn't that worth a gamble, Lyndy?"

LYNDAL bit her lips in indecision. "But suppose, Lance, that Mansure isn't on the square? You're letting him handle the money. Suppose he gives you a crooked deal? You'd be ruined and dishonored. Is any gamble worth that?"

Little angry fires leaped to life in his eyes and she knew she had lost. "You're doing a lot of supposing, Lyndal."

The door opened and Dolly came out, interrupting them rudely. Coming swiftly to Lance's side, she slipped her hand through his arm possessively. "Is Lance telling you about my party, Lyndal? I'm so thrilled, I can hardly wait till Saturday."

Red flooded Lance's face. "I—I hadn't got to that yet, Dolly."

Dolly took over promptly. "Lance is giving me a dance out at the Silver Spur, Lyndal. My very first ranch party. You must be sure to come." Her voice was both patronizing and triumphant.

Lyndal, stunned and shaken, looked at Lance incredulously.

His eyes didn't quite meet hers as he muttered. "I was just going to tell you about it, Lyndy. I'll come and get you.

"We'll both come," Dolly added sweetly, her eyes mocking.

That look was like the flick of a whip on a raw wound and stung Lyndal back to life. She lifted her head proudly, forced a smile to her lips. "Don't bother," she managed to say, "I had heard about the party

and already have an escort. I wouldn't miss it for anything."

Head still high, she turned swiftly and left, knowing the tears were crowding dangerously close to her burning eyelids.

Lance called, "Wait, Lyndy!" but she didn't stop. In a moment he overtook her, halted her with a firm hand on her arm.

"You don't understand, Lyndy. I meant to tell you about the party. And—of course, I'm taking you."

Still smarting under her hurt, Lyndal felt a ferocious desire to strike back. Looking past him she saw her weapon in the person of Truman Hays, striding toward them with his florid face wreathed in smiles.

"But I told you," she said quickly to Lance, "I'm coming with Tru. He's such fun, I wouldn't miss it."

That, she knew, would stop Lance. He had always been more than a little jealous of Tru, who made no secret of his feelings for Lyndal Garson. Without another word Lance turned away.

Tru came up and Lyndal asked quickly, before her courage left her, "Tru, would you like to come by and take me to Lance's party Saturday night? I—he'll be so busy."

"He seems to stay busy these days." Trumen Hays light blue eyes were wise and, Lyndal thought, a little pitying. The thought was fresh acid on her wounds.

"But you know I'll come gladly, Lyndy," Tru went on. "I been waiting for this chance a long time, hoping that tenderfoot blonde would do me a good turn."

"The blonde has nothing to do with it," Lyndal began lamely.

Tru laughed and took her arm. "Makes no difference to me, Lyndy. When somebody gives me a horse I don't go looking into his mouth."

In spite of the crude compliment, Lyndal felt balm had been poured over her wounds. There had been a time, before she knew Lance, when she had thought she might be in love with Trumen Hays. Maybe if she was smart she'd start thinking that way again—instead of worrying over Lance.

There was a lot to recommend Tru. He was high-spirited, red-blooded, full of life. He would never keep a girl guessing about his feelings, torment her with doubts.

CHAPTER THREE

The Big Party

TRU came on Saturday night, driving the black mules hitched to an open surrey. Lyndal got in carefully, half expecting them to bolt before Tru got a tight rein. She felt a little cross at him for driving them, for he had gentler animals.

"You do like these black devils, don't you?" she said, as the mules lunged away.

He laughed his big laugh. "Sure do, Lyndy. I like wild things. Things with spunk in their makeup."

He leaned close to her and his pale eyes glowed like lights in the darkness. "That's why I like you, Lyndy. You got spunk. Too much to be kicked around by a sissy-pants like Lance Burnet."

"Lance isn't a sissy-pants," Lyndal said hotly. "And he isn't kicking me around, Tru Hays. And if you're going to talk like that you can just stop and let me out."

He laughed louder, so that the mules' trot turned into a nervous lope. "See there?" his big voice boomed. "You're as skittish as Black Diamond there. Always ready to fly off like a firecracker. That's what I like about you, Lyndy."

That wasn't what Lance liked, Lyndal thought drearily. Lance wanted her tame and docile, like he was, ready to accept everyone at their face value. She and Tru were more alike, had more in common.

As if he read her thoughts, Tru leaned nearer. "We'd make a great team, you and me, Lyndy. We'd live hard and ask no odds of anybody."

A thrill swept through Lyndal. Here was all the vigorous depth of feeling she had missed in Lance. Here was the strong food

her hungry heart craved! She wondered what it would be like to be kissed by Tru Hays. She looked at him and smiled and saw the ardor in his eyes and knew that she would soon have the chance to find out. And she was sudddenly glad, for that would help, perhaps, in the job she had set herself —the job of forgetting Lance Burnet.

But Black Diamond and his mate kept Tru too busy for further talk. They shied at every shadow, fought their bits and ran furiously at breath-taking intervals. And the more rebellious they were, the more Tru seemed to enjoy it.

Lyndal, clinging tight to the sides of the seat to keep her balance and thrilling at this duel between man and beasts, thought: *Life with Tru Hays will be like this—never a dull moment, never a day without its spirited challenge. I think I will like it. . . .*

The Silver Spur ranch house, a low-roofed, six-roomed adobe, was gay with lights and laughter. But it was hot and crowded, too, for it seemed the whole countryside was there. It hadn't been hard to avoid Lance, for his duties as host kept him busy.

So Lyndal had danced most of the evening with Tru. And Tru's arms had held her a little tighter each round. His big laugh had grown louder, more boisterous and excited.

When, near the close of the evening, he asked her to walk out with him while he took a smoke, she went willingly, glad to escape from curious eyes.

They stopped under a big elm near the house and Tru smoked in silence for a moment. Smoked furiously, as he did everything, the glow of his cigarette making a bright flare in the darkness. Then it described a swift arch and fell to the ground in a shower of sparks. He turned and took Lyndal roughly into his arms.

There was nothing of tenderness in his kiss, no wild stirring ecstacy. It was rough as Tru Hays himself, and it swept Lyndal off her feet. All her hunger for Lance rose like a consuming force in her and she found herself responding in a way which she had never meant to do.

Tru's arms tightened and his lips pressed closed. Suddenly revulsion was a black flood closing over Lyndal, smothering her. This wasn't love, she knew in a blinding flash of understanding.

She struggled for freedom but her struggles only delighted Hays. Lyndal thought she must know how the back mules felt when his strong hand was on the reins—as though they must fight free of some strange power that would enslave them. But fighting Tru was as futile as pitting her puny strength against a stone wall.

IT WAS Lance who ended the kiss. His lean form loomed up beside them without warning. His hand shot out and spun Trumen Hays about like a top. His voice, hard, cold steel, cut the darkness sharply: "I guess I got the right to ask what this means?"

"The hell you have!" Hays voice was saw-edged. "Lyndy's through giving you rights, Lance. I'm taking over from now on."

"You lie, Hays!" Lance's voice was still cold as a winter's ice-locked lake. "Lyndal, did you give him the right to do that? If you didn't I'm going to kill him for it."

There was nothing of bluster or violence in his voice. Only that cold, deadly seriousness that sent a chilling, fearful fright through Lyndal. She didn't doubt in that moment that Lance would do exactly as he said.

Tru Hays seemed to have no doubt, either, for he began backing slowly away, his big hands moving nervously. "Now, see here, Lance—" he began.

But Lance was looking at Lyndal. "Did you?" he repeated, inexorable.

Lyndal drew a slow, painful breath, knowing that she had to do. "Yes," she managed, through stiff lips. "Yes, Lance.

I gave him the right. I wanted him to."

She could hear Tru's indrawn breath of relief. Surprise flicked at her. So Tru had been afraid! Afraid of quiet, gentle Lance whom he called a sissy-pants. Tru who liked his mules—and his women—to have spunk!

For a moment Lance stood still, tense. Then his voice stabbed at her again through the darkness. Just a single word, but it cut like a whip's lash: "Why?"

This time it struck deep and stirred anger in her. Who was he to question her, after letting her down as he had? She turned to Hays and said swiftly, Go get your team, Tru. I'm ready to go."

Hays seemed ready to go, too. Plainly relieved, he hurried away. Then Lyndal turned to Lance, letting her anger and hurt pour out like spilled acid.

"So you want to know why I wanted to kiss Tru Hays? Then I'll tell you why, Lance Burnet! Because I wanted to see how it felt to be kissed by a man who loved me—by a man with some feeling, who wouldn't be thinking of how rich he could get while he was doing it! You haven't got it in you to kiss a girl like that!"

He was close enough that she felt the jerk of his body, as though a knife had struck deep. Then his hands closed on her arms with such force she thought the bones would be crushed, and he pulled her hard against him.

"So you craved a kiss and you thought you had to go to Tru Hays for it? You were mighty wrong, Lyndy."

His lips were flame against hers then. A flame that was consuming the very bones of Lyndal's body, leaving her trembling and helpless and afraid.

A moment as long as eternity and as short-lived as an indrawn breath and Lance released her, so suddenly she almost fell. His hoarse, uneven breathing and his strangely shaking voice were lashes whipping Lyndal back to sanity, as he said:

"If that was what you wanted—you should be satisfied now."

He turned swiftly away and blended into the darkness. Though Lyndal's heart called after him, she stood there like one paralyzed. When Tru Hays drove up with the team she climbed in beside him, dazedly.

THE mules were more fractious than ever on the way home. Tru more harsh and impatient, plainly venting his rage against Lance. Lyndal was relieved that he took so little notice of her.

But at the Wagon Wheel he tied the mules before coming to help her down. When his arms closed about her, drawing her roughly close, she felt a violent revulsion and pushed him away.

"Please Tru, not tonight." His answer was to pull her closer so that she protested sharply. "Let me go, Tru!"

"But you loved me a little while ago, Lyndy!" He was plainly bewildered at the change in her. "You kissed me."

Shame swept over Lyndal. How could she explain to Tru that it had really been Lance Burnet she was kissing, even while Tru held her in his arms? With more strength than she knew she possessed, Lyndal tore free, saying a hasty, "I'm tired, Tru. Good night," and ran to the door.

He left then and she could hear his voice cursing the mules far down the road. And she knew it should have been herself upon whose back the lash was laid. . . .

At the breakfast table the next morning Miss Cindy eyed Lyndal sharply. "Must have been a whale of a party last night, judging from those black rings under your eyes. Didn't let that blonde gal heel you, did you?"

Dan Garson broke his usual breakfast-table silence to say, "Hear tell Lance's oil company stock's selling like wild fire. Everybody in the valley's bought but me, I reckon."

Lucinda Walters spoke directly to him, something she seldom did. "You ain't figuring on buying in, are you? You wouldn't be quite that big a fool—you couldn't be."

Lyndal knew she had said the wrong thing. That strange antagonism she often felt between her father and her aunt sprang to full life and seemed to take tangible shape as the glances of the two older people met and held. There was anger in both pairs of eyes, and something else that often puzzled Lyndal. Was it hate? She wasn't sure, but when Dan Garson spoke, his voice was stubborn and harsh like a man brushing aside all opposition.

"Will if I want to. Reckon can't no woman tell me what I can and can't do. You ought to know that by now, Lucindy Walters."

He helped himself to another plate of food that Lyndal felt sure he didn't want. "Come to think of it," he added deliberately, "might be a good thing to do. I ain't afeared of anything Lance Burnet is running."

Miss Cindy got up, her eyes bleak, her lips set in the familiar stubborn way. "Best be sure he's running it, though," she snapped and stalked stiffly out to the kitchen.

Garson glared after her. "Of all the stubborn fool women," he mumbled. "She beats 'em all!"

Lyndal rose, and as she passed his chair leaned over and kissed him. "You're both stubborn," she said. "but you're both sweet."

He looked pleased and touched, though she didn't expect him to admit it.

"Go on," he said gruffly. "You'll have us getting as mushy as that Mansure feller and his gal."

A sudden chill swept through Lyndal. "What do you mean, Pa? What gal?"

"Why, you know, that Dolly gal of his'n. I took the river road to town the other day and danged if I didn't see that red-topped buggy setting in a grove of cottonwoods. Sort of curious, I rode past and saw him an' her settin' in there together. Don't think they even saw me."

With a rush, all Lyndal's suspicions of Joe and Dolly Mansure swept back over her. She was remembering the day they separated so quickly when she entered the tent office.

CHAPTER FOUR

Desperate Lady

AUNT CINDY was shelling peas on the porch when Lyndal came out, dressed in riding skirt and boots. She had strapped on her pistol holster and cartridge belt.

Miss Cindy looked up briefly. "Gunning for somebody? If they're in town you'll have to sashay it. Your pa took your horse. His'n is lamed."

Lyndal uttered an exclamation of dismay. "What'll I do?" I've just got to see Lance—tell him something. Isn't there something to ride, Aunt Cindy?"

"Not a hoof on the place. All in the north pasture. But what's the use of getting in a lather, child? You just saw how much good it does trying to tell a man anything he don't want to know."

Along the pasture trail there was a swiftly moving cloud of dust heading toward the ranch house, from which emerged the glistening black heads of a team of mules. They were fighting their bits, as usual, and were seething with rebellion.

Lyndal's lips tightened and she said thoughtfully, "You know Aunt Cindy, I believe I could drive those black mules if I had to. But I wouldn't do it with the whip, like Tru does. I'd try a light rein, like you once said."

The old lady stood up so abruptly she spilled her peas. "If I'd a been that smart at your age I wouldn't be a sharp-tongued old maid now. You git on in there, Lyndy, and git that Dolly thing out of the saddle and show her how to ride."

Lyndal dreaded the trip into town with Tru, but it was the quickest way she knew. "I'm in a hurry, Tru," she said. "Show me

what these mules can do with some urging."

He had risen to her bait and he and his mules fought each other busily all the way into town. The five miles were covered quickly, but not too quickly for Lyndal. Some strange urgency kept beating at her, so that she wanted to get out and run ahead of the fast-stepping team. *There's no hurry,* she kept reminding herself, to quiet those indefinable fears that pricked at her. But the hunch persisted that there was.

Driving through the crowded street of Postoak, Tru had to stop his team to let a string of loaded wagons pass. They were near the edge of the street but Tru seemed unmindful of the crowd on the board walk. He put his arm boldly and possessively about Lyndal's waist and pulled her tight against him. "Some of these days we'll be riding in to see the preacher," he said, his voice very sure.

Just at that moment Lyndal looked up and saw Lance on the sidewalk. He was looking at them and his eyes, full of such scorn that Lyndal cringed before their fire, met hers like a blow. Then he turned quickly and was lost in the crowd.

With a start, Lyndal sprang up and was over the wheel before Tru could stop her. She mustn't let Lance get away! It might take hours to find him and that strange need for haste was prodding her again.

Remembering that harsh look in Lance's eyes, it wasn't easy to run after him until she was breathless, calling, "Wait Lance!" He was almost to the hotel, where she could see the crowd gathering to meet the daily mail coach, Postoak's only connection with the railroad twenty miles away, before he heard her.

When he turned, his eyes cold and unfriendly, he said curtly, "I'm in a hurry. Dolly's leaving on this stage and I promised to be there to say good-by."

"Leaving?" Lyndal gasped, that chilling premonition a cold certainty now. "Lance, where? Why?"

He looked at her in uninterested surprise. "To Chicago, I think. She got word her aunt's sick. I'll have to hurry, Lyndal."

"Lance, wait!" It took all Lyndal's will power to stand against the unfriendliness in his face. "There's something I must tell you—"

He only half-turned. "If it's about Dolly," he said, "I don't want to hear it."

He stalked on then and Lyndal felt he was stomping right over her heart. Unable to help herself, she followed a ways, her heart in a turmoil of helplessness. If only she had some facts to give Lance, instead of just vague suspicions, she would force him to listen. But there seemed nothing more she could do.

Almost dazedly, she watched Dolly Mansure come out of the hotel and bid a tearful good-by to Lance, dabbing at her eyes prettily. Tightly clasped in Dolly's arms was a small satchel, too large for a hand bag. Seeing the care with which Dolly handled it, the conviction struck Lyndal that it must contain valuables of some sort. Money? Could it be the money belonging to the Silver Spur Oil Company, and for which Lance would be held responsible?

It was more than possible, her reason told her. It was logical. If Joe Mansure coveted that money, and Lyndal had never doubted that, it would be a simple and safe trick to send Dolly off boldly with it this way. No one would stop and search her. Any night he could slip out and ride cross country to the railroad. Or he might even stay and blame Lance with the loss of the money, accuse him of taking it!

The driver was mounting his seat now! the stage was ready to start. Heart hammering wildly, Lyndal started forward. She must stop Dolly. She mustn't be allowed to leave with that satchel until they knew for sure what was in it.

Just in time reason returned to Lyndal. She couldn't stop Dolly that way. You couldn't just rush up and demand of a girl that she display the contents of her bag to curious eyes. She would only make herself

ridiculous and insure Dolly's safe get-away. There must be some other way.

The stage driver popped his long whip; the wheels began slowly turning. Dolly Mansure was leaving, and if Lyndal could trust her hunch she was taking with her everything Lance Burnet held dear—his lands, his herds, his good reputation. Even his freedom, doubtless, for some one would have to be made to suffer for the ranchers' loss.

NEVER before had Lyndal loved Lance Burnet so much as in that moment when she believed she was witnessing his betrayal, and pictured so vividly the toll it would exact from him.

Whirling, she plunged through the crowd and toward the vacant lot behind the hotel where she knew Tru left his team when he planned to be in town a while. Only a vague half formed plan was in her mind. A completely crazy plan, but Lyndal wasn't stopping to reason just then. She was playing a hunch, win or lose!

As she ran, her thoughts ran even faster. Suppose Tru wasn't there, had already left the team? Dared she try to drive those mean-tempered mules? Or suppose Tru himself refused to help her? Very likely he would. What then?

But Tru wasn't there. The mules stood, quiet enough, tied to a post, with just the outside traces loosened. For a moment Lyndal's courage failed her. Dared she approach those skittish animals, lean close to their flying heels while she fastened those traces to the tree? And dared she try to drive them even if she succeeded in fastening the harness?

Only a second did she hesitate. A cloud of dust rolled lazily from the front of the hotel and she knew the stage had picked up speed, was gone. But the river road was shorter and intercepted the stage road a few miles above town. Tru's mules could outrun the stage four and beat them to Flat Rock curve if it didn't take too long to get the wagon hitched and the mules started off.

With the thought, Lyndal went into action. Fear was lost now in the greater force of determination, so that she approached the black mules firmly, picked up the traces and snapped them into place before the animals had time to do more than prick up their ears. Then, reins in hand, she loosened the hitch rope and went over the wheel as agilely as a monkey, and was settled firmly in the seat by the time the mules made the first startled lunge.

Once on the rough river road, Lyndal gave them their head, holding the lines just taut enough for them to remember she was there, but making no other move to control them. They ran furiously, like streaks of black sunshine. She soon discovered they kept in the rutted road. So, feet braced against the dashboard, Lyndal kept her hands and her lines steady and felt exultation rise in her at the swiftness with which they covered the ground—and at the ease with which she was soon controlling the mean mules. *It's easy*, she thought, triumphantly, *if you don't let them know you're doing it.* And she felt a wave of gratitude toward Aunt Cindy and her philosophy. . . .

At Flat Rock curve, and for a mile beyond, the road narrowed to almost a one way trail, except for the place, just around the curve, where the river road joined the upper trail the stage took. At this junction point Lyndal stopped her winded mules in such a position that the road was completely blocked.

When the stage crept around the curve made by the big, flat-jutting boulder, the driver jerked his teams to a quick stop as he found his way blocked by a surrey drawn by big, black mules. And standing in the open vehicle a girl, with hair the same glistening black, held a leveled six-shooter.

Cursing loudly, the stage driver demanded: "What the hell is this? A joke?"

"No joke," Lyndal answered firmly. "A holdup, mister. Throw down your gun and

tell your passengers to pile out and bring their baggage."

Surreptitiously he reached for the gun beside him. Lyndal's voice stopped him. "I can shoot straight, mister. And these mules will plow you under if I do and you know it."

Her voice was calm with desperation and he must have sensed it. He threw his gun beside the trail as she directed and called to his frightened passengers. One by one they got out and brought their luggage and deposited it in the surrey at Lyndal's direction. Two elderly men, two very scared women. Then Dolly Mansure, gripping the small black satchel Lyndal coveted.

DOLLY protested bitterly, and for a breathless moment Lyndal feared she was going to call her bluff. Dark eyes battled blue, and the dark ones won. Dolly came and dropped the bag into the surrey bed, crying wildly, "You're plain crazy, Lyndal Garson! You'll pay dear for this!"

When she had the bags, Lyndal picked up the reins in one hand, pistol still leveled with the other, and backed her team off the road. Then she motioned the stage driver on, not having touched the mail pouch. She would have enough to answer for without that, she thought ruefully. But was sure the contents of Dolly Mansure's satchel would win her exoneration.

Knowing the stage would have to go a mile before it turned, as she knew it would, to go back to Postoak and report the holdup, Lyndal again took the river road. She would beat the stage back to town and tell her story first!

But she couldn't wait to find out for sure about that satchel. So she halted the mules again and with the butt of her gun broke the lock and opened the bag with trembling fingers.

Excitement shook her, blurring her vision for a breathless moment. Then her eyes cleared and a strangled cry rose in her throat. Feverishly her shaking hands stirred the contents of the satchel, but it was no use. The grip held nothing but a book or two and some cheap stones! No money, no valuables of any kind!

Nausea clutched at Lyndal and her head swam dizzily. How could she have been so wrong? She had been so sure—so sure. She had gambled everything on a hunch and lost. What now? When that stage got back to town with the story, Lyndal Garson would be a woman with a price on her head. An outlaw! And no story she could tell, no alibis, would help, since her suspicions had proved groundless concerning Dolly and her little satchel.

There was only one small chance for her. If she could beat the stage to town and deliver those bags intact to the sheriff, she might pretend the whole thing was a joke. A joke no one would appreciate, she knew, but such a story and her volunteer surrender might earn for her nothing worse than the scorn and ridicule of the whole community. That would be bad enough, and pain tore at her as she pictured Lance's face when he heard.

But there was no time for regrets. Resolutely she broke her gun and took out the shells and threw them away. Also those from her cartridge belt. Her story would go over better if her gun was found empty. Then she started the mules at top speed toward town.

But halfway there Black Diamond suddenly went lame. Lyndal knew the signs, knew he must have picked up a small stone that had lodged in his fetlock. If it had been her own pony she would have known what to do, but this nervous mule would never let a strange woman raise his hoof and probe for the rock. Neither could he travel on that rough road without suffering and injury.

By her code, there was only one thing to do. They must wait until some one came along that could remove that imbedded stone. That meant that Lyndal must wait, too, for she couldn't carry those five grips

and she dared not abandon them. That would only make her position worse, if possible.

Heavy hearted, sick with despair, she pulled the team off the road and settled back for the agonizing wait.

While she waited in growing anxiety, with the sun dripping toward the western horizon, her head cleared and she realized what a foolhardy thing she had done. But regrets were futile and would not help. She still felt the Mansures were plotting against Lance, and that this sudden trip of Dolly's had something to do with it.

And there was something else that bothered her. Dolly had looked different today. There was something definitely strange there, but. . .

Suddenly she sat bolt upright in the seat, excitement rising in her. She had just realized what that difference was. Dolly had been wearing a dress with a bustle, something Lyndal had never seen her do before. Not a significant fact, perhaps, except that Dolly was a modish dresser and bustles were definitely on their way out. No one but the older women wore them any more now.

Why did her very new traveling dress have such a large, pronounced one? Could that mean anything, or was this just another crazy hunch that would lead nowhere? Her first hunch had led her straight into serious trouble. Dared she follow another?

With mingled feelings of relief and fright, she heard the beat of horses' hoofs and knew the posse was coming. With this new idea taking possession of her, she had a sharp regret for the bullets she had thrown away. But she would manage some way. She had to—for Lance.

Then they were surrounding her, a battery of accusing faces. The sheriff was there, among others. And Lance, his face very white and distraught. And Tru Hays, his florid face puzzled and angry. Lyndal shivered.

CHAPTER FIVE

Fight for Your Man!

AT THE sheriff's order Lyndal got down and surrendered her gun. The lawman looked in the back of the surrey and scratched his head, puzzled. "Don't make sense," he muttered. "An empty gun, those grips untouched and her just a-settin' here. What in tarnation! But you fellers there get busy and get this stuff into town so's the stage can start out again. And tell the jailer to get his parlor suite ready."

"But you can't take Lyndal to jail, sheriff!" Lance protested his voice strained and hoarse. "You haven't got a decent place to put her."

"Got the place the law pervides fer criminals," the sheriff returned laconically. "Wouldn't know what else to do with a gal that stole a team of mules and robbed a stage. Would you?"

"She—she couldn't have known what she was doing," Lance said helplessly, and new life warmed Lyndal's heart at his defense of her.

Tru Hays snorted his unbelief. "Anybody drives those mules of mine has to know what they're a-doing. How she ever done it without getting herself killed beats me."

"You've been saying that all afternoon, Hays," Lance said sharply," and I'm tired hearing it. And I don't believe Lyndal knew what she was doing. She must have been sick—out of her head."

Lyndal saw her cue and snatched at it. "I—I am sick," she faltered. "Lance, help me. I'm going to faint—"

With a cry Lance sprang to her side, and Lyndal sagged into his arms. For just a moment—a heavenly moment—she felt their strong tenderness supporting her. For that same moment she was shielded from view of the others by his body and her hands closed softly about the butt of his

revolver. Then, with a swift lunge, she was on her feet facing the posse.

"Hands up, everybody!" she cried. "And throw your guns on the ground."

A look into her blazing eyes and they all complied. But the sheriff was crafty and dropped his close to his feet. To get that weapon Lyndal would have to stoop dangerously close, making her vulnerable for the moment. She knew it, knew what he meant to do.

Only for a moment did she hesitate. Then she said to Tru Hays, "Pick up those guns and put them all in the sheriff's saddle bags."

Tru protested, as she might have known he would do. "Don't drag me any deeper into this. You've already—"

Lance brought an end to his protest and Lyndal's dilemma. "I'll do it," he said quietly. Stepping forward, he quickly and expertly gathered up the firearms and carried them to the sheriff's mount. When he turned back he still held one of the guns in his hand and it was trained on the lawmen.

"Get going," he said to Lyndal. "I'll cover for you."

While Lyndal mounted the sheriff's horse, the lawman tried reasoning with Lance. "You'll only help make things worse for her, Lance. If the girl don't know what she's doing—"

"She knows," Lance said briefly. "She knows but I don't. But whatever it is, I'm backing her play to the limit. How long shall I hold them, Lyndy?"

"Give me fifteen minutes. Then come to the hotel. And thank you, Lance!" Then she put spurs to the horse and split the wind toward town.

But the wind whistling past her ears was music now and in her heart was only high courage and determination. Even the pounding of the horse's hoofs resolved into a rhythmic tune, *Lance believes in me.* She knew she would win now. She had to!

If she was right about Dolly, she knew the blonde girl would wait in her room for the second starting of the stage. Lyndal knew the number of the room, so leaving her horse behind the hotel she stole through the back door and along the narrow deserted hall.

Dolly's door was locked. Lyndal knocked. Then she turned the knob cautiously. Her heart leaped at the sound of soft movement inside.

Dolly's voice came softly, hardly more than a whisper, "Joe?"

"Yes," Lyndal whispered, deep in her throat. "Hurry!"

THE door opened a careful crack and Lyndal did the rest. She was inside, the door locked again, before the white-faced Dolly could make a move.

Dolly opened her mouth to scream but shut it as Lyndal snapped: "Yelling won't get you anything. I'm going to take your clothes off if I have to do it in front of the town. Maybe off your dead body. Now—"

Dolly backed away, her eyes big with fright. "Don't you dare touch me!"

Lyndal's arm shot out, caught the front of Dolly's dress and yanked. The stout material resisted and she had to jerk harder. By that time Dolly had her hands in Lyndal's long hair and was pulling unmercifuly. There was strength in those white arms, too. More than Lyndal had thought possible. The pain was intense and only by lunging in close against Dolly's body could she lessen it.

Then the girls were fighting like wildcats. Lyndal didn't spend time or strength defending herself. All her efforts went into reaching past Dolly's arms, getting her hands on Dolly's clothes, and ripping them ruthlessly. Stout as the material was, Lyndal's hands were stronger and soon Dolly's dress hung in ribbons. She yanked again on Dolly's skirt and gave a hoarse gasp of triumph as it came away in her hand.

But her trimuph was short lived. There was no bustle in the skirt as there should have been! Lyndal, in dismay, dropped it.

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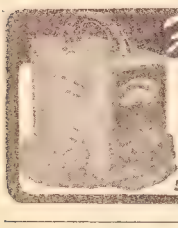

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But in that split second Dolly had broken loose and made the door. Twisting the key, she threw it open, screaming, "Help!"

But Dolly didn't escape. Outside the door there was a sentinel—a gaunt, grim-faced woman, who gave Dolly a violent shove that sent her sprawling back into the room flat on her back.

Aunt Cindy's hoarse whisper reached Lyndal as one sound with the slamming of the door: "Finish what you started gal! You can't let her throw you now!"

The challenge was like a bugle call into battle. With a pounce as quick as a cat's, Lyndal was astride the prostrate Dolly. Then Lyndal gave a cry of triumph as green bills fell over Dolly like a shower of leaves.

All the fight left Dolly and she suddenly covered her face with her hands and shook with sobs. Lyndal just had time to snatch a blanket from the bed and throw it over Dolly as the door burst open and people poured into the room, led by the sheriff.

Lyndal tried to straighten her hair and clothing. Dolly lay still under the protecting blanket, crying quietly, hopelessly. The men stared at the girls and at the money on the floor.

Aunt Cindy began gathering up the money as though it was an every-day task, talking briskly all the while.

"Reckon this belongs to the Super Spur Oil company. Figured Lyndy was looking for something like this when I heard about the holdup this afternoon. Reckon she had more trouble finding it than she first figured, though. Well, what are you gaping for, Dan Garson? Why don't you do something for Lyndy? Give her a swig of that stuff you call whiskey, or something."

LYNDAL'S eyes had cleared and she saw her father grin sheepishly. Saw, too, that Lance Burnet wasn't in the room

(Please continue on page 110)

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(Continued from page 108)

and knew a sharp pang of disappointment.

Dan Garson was saying, "My whiskey wouldn't do Lindy much good, Cindy. Tain't nothing much but colored water."

"As though I didn't know that," the old lady retorted. "Well, there's places sells it, ain't there? And I think you'd better get yourself one, the way you been stewing for the last hour over Lyndy."

There was a commotion at the door and the crowd fell back to let two figures through. Joe Mansure stumbled in, hands bound tightly behind him. And after him, prodding with his gun, came Lance Burnet.

"Figured we might need him to answer questions, Sheriff," Lance explained, "so I made for the office when you came here. If Lyndy knows something—" He stopped, suddenly conscious of the sobbing figure on the floor and the disorder of the room.

"Lyndy knows plenty," Miss Cindy told him. "She knows Dolly Mansure won't be wearing a forty-thousand-dollar bustle to Chicago, for one thing, while you money-drunk cowpokes are left holding the bag and wishing for the sight of an honest cow."

The sheriff scratched his head, hitched up his empty holster. "Well, looks like we'll need that parlor suite in jail, even if 'tis for a different lady."

Dolly sat up, her face so white and stricken that pity stirred in Lyndal.

"Don't take her to jail," Lyndal pleaded. "What she did was for him," with a nod toward the silent, scowling Mansure, "because she loved him. A woman will do—almost anything for the man she loves."

Aunt Cindy chuckled. "You ought to know, Lyndy. You just robbed a stage and almost committed murder for one. But are you trying to tell us this Dolly gal ain't Mansure's daughter like they claimed?"

"That's right," Lyndal said. "Isn't it, Dolly?"

For answer the blonde cried softly.

Joe Mansure swore softly. "The girl's

guessed it, Sheriff. And no use taking Dolly to jail. As long as you've got me in there she'll stick around."

In the hall, dim with approaching night, Lance stopped and pulled Lyndal gently into his arms.

"I want to tell you I'm cured, Lyndy. No more gambling for me. If it hadn't been for you I'd not only be ruined, but I'd have brought ruin on my friends. Nothing could have made up for that. If the men want to take that money and drill for oil, they can. But I'm going back to stock raising, something I know about. And when I build back that herd of pure breds, Lyndy, will—will you marry me?"

Down the hall another couple had stopped and a familiar, high-pitched voice was saying, "So you thought you was fooling me all these years, Dan Garson, with that colored water you drank?"

"Sort of stubborn yourself, ain't you, Cindy?" Dan Garson's voice answered. "Twenty years ago you vowed you wouldn't marry me till I swore off drinking. Then after I married your sister and she died and you come to raise Lyndy, you set out again to watch me and see if I was ready to quit. You didn't expect me to tell you I'd come to hate the stuff, did you?"

"Well, you didn't expect me to tell you I was ready to marry you, drunk or sober, did you, Dan Garson? That's one thing a woman won't do. She'll fight for her man, like Lyndy did, or steal for him like that Dolly gal, but she won't ever propose."

Lyndal laughed softly, moving closer to Lance.

"Aunt Cindy's wrong," she whispered. "I'll ask the man I love to marry me. Lance, let's don't wait. Let's build back that herd together."

Lance's answer was a kiss. A completely satisfactory kiss, warmly tender with love. And it told Lyndal everything she wanted to know.

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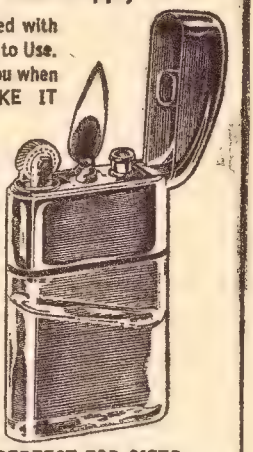

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POLIO POINTERS FOR 1951

If Polio Comes . . .

DON'T—get over-tired by hard play, exercise, work or travel.
This means men, women and children.
Because—Scientists believe that once a person has become infected with polio, a delicate balance exists between the polio virus and the body's ability to fight it. The scales can be tipped in favor of the virus by overexertion. A recent study revealed that heavy exertion in the early stages of the disease resulted in more severe and extensive paralysis.

DON'T—get chilled. Don't bathe or swim long in cold water or sit around in wet clothes.
Because—Research has indicated that chilling and physical exertion seem to lower body resistance to the virus, once it has entered your body.

DON'T—have mouth or throat operations during a polio outbreak.
Because—Recent surveys have demonstrated that tonsillectomies performed at this time increase the risk of getting bulbar polio (most serious form) by 11 times.

DON'T—use another person's towels, dishes, tableware or the like.
Because—Virus is excreted from the bowel and throat and may be transferred unknowingly by these implements.

DON'T—take children to places where there is polio; ask your health department for advice.
Because—Moving the child would needlessly expose him to the polio virus.

DON'T—take your child out of camp or playground, where there is good health supervision.
Because—He already has been exposed to the virus by the time a case has been reported. Routine daily living under proper supervision, such as good camps and playgrounds offer, is a safeguard to his health.

CUPID GOES WEST

(Continued from page 63)

Before Aydelott could follow up, Hoadley was coming again, roaring blood like a baleful animal, and this time a tremendous sweeping blow caught the side of Aydelott's sandy head and sent him plunging to the earth. Hoadley jumped after the prostrate officer, bent on kicking the life out of him, but Aydelott rolled away and lashed out with his own legs, spilling the giant with a solid thud.

As they scrambled frenziedly to their knees, Hoadley's huge hand jerked up with the gun in it. Somebody screamed in shrill terror. But Park Aydelott ripped his own Colt out and turned it loose before Hoadley could trigger. The blasting flames beat Hoadley backward into the soil, where he writhed convulsively a moment and was still.

When the gorilla-like Chip Gowie hurtled toward Aydelott, Sergeant Walt Tidmore was there to gunwhip him senseless to the prairie sod. And when Fresno Wales, the weasel, started to draw, old Jim Carey clubbed him down with the still-hot barrel of his Sharps rifle.

"He ain't dead," somebody said over Hoadley's body.

Walt Tidmore sprayed tobacco juice, drawling: "That's too bad now." For Jerry Pryor and the Porters he would gladly have killed all three of the men responsible.

Park Aydelott was upright with Mary Ellen weeping softly in the sheltering curve of his long arm. The music, interrupted by violence, was slowly starting again in their hearts and their blood.

Jim Carey stood beside them and said: "I feel better to get into some of this fighting, and I feel better to see you two together at last. My little girl doesn't learn too fast, Park. But once she really gets something, she's pretty apt to keep it."

Park Aydelott grinned. "I won't be very hard to hold, Jim," he said.

THE END

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